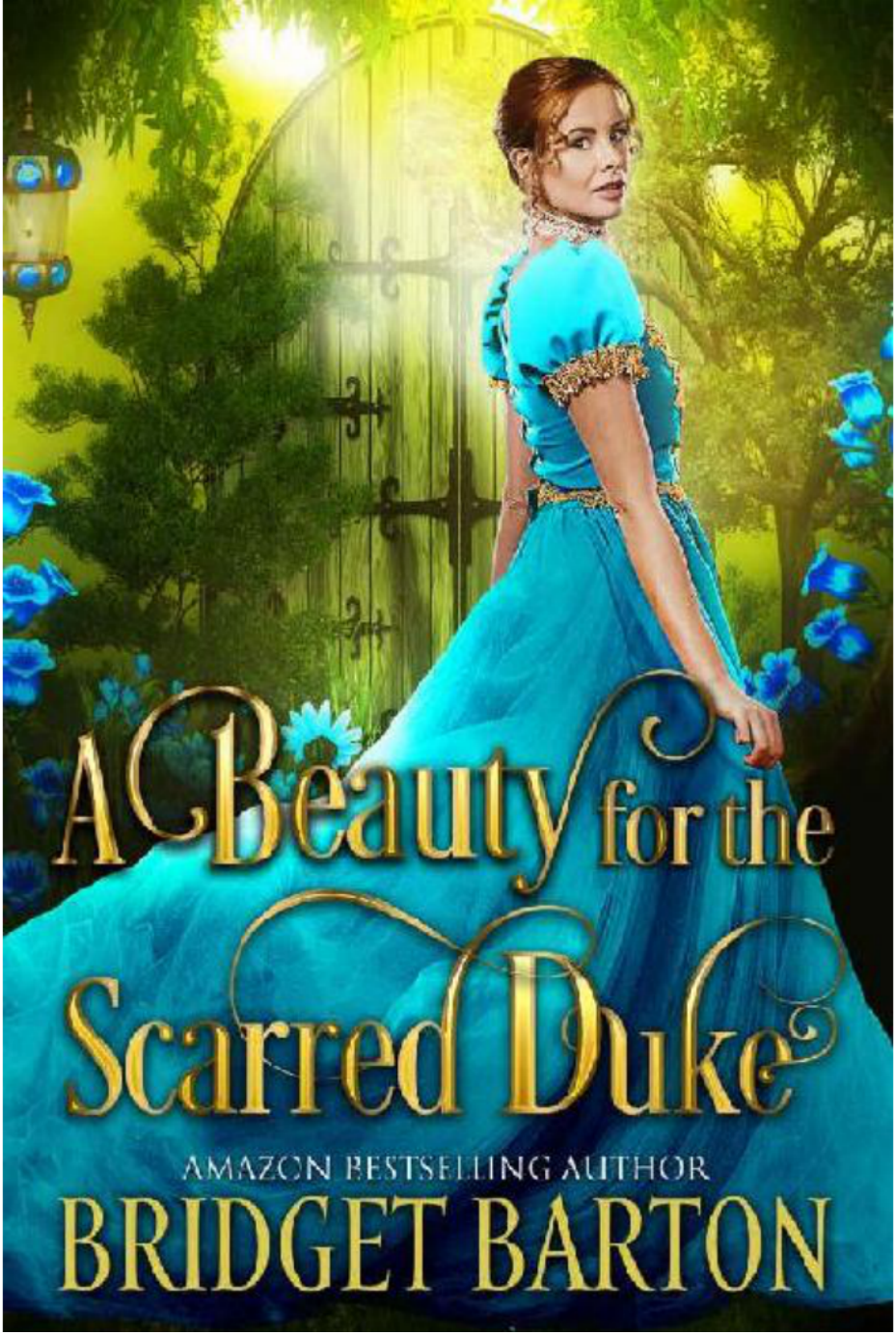

A Beauty for the
Scarred Duke
AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRIDGET BARTON

A Beauty for the Scarred Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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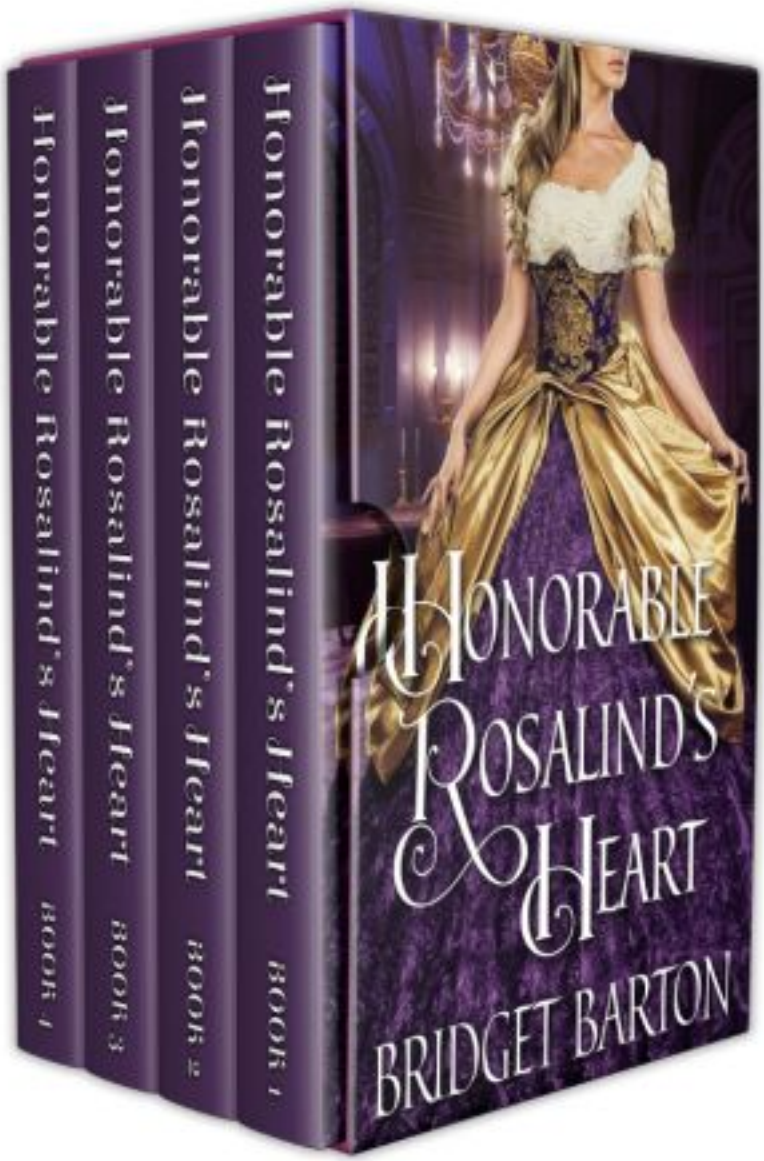
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A Beauty for the Scarred Duke

Introduction

As young girls, Lady Isabella Tate, daughter of the Earl of Upperton, and her friend, Esme, told each other terrifying tales of the monster. But not just any monster. This monster was alive and living in his old mansion behind a tangle of overgrown hawthorn trees in the very same county. This monster was none other than Elliot Covington, the Duke of Coldwell.

The Duke of Coldwell, scarred for life in a fire which claimed the lives of those dearest to him has been hiding in his mansion for almost eighteen years. He knows he is a figure of fear and speculation in the county and chose many years before to live a life of self-imposed isolation. But he is the loneliest Duke in all of England. When the Earl of Upperton sells his daughter off as a bride for the disfigured Duke, Isabella has never been more terrified. Due to marry a man she has never met and always believed to be a monster, she truly believes her life is over.

But is life with the Duke really something to be afraid of? Will Isabella be able to get past her own prejudice and see the man beneath the scars? And will the Duke be able to let go of the pain and guilt that has swallowed him whole for almost two decades and find a new life with a new love?

Chapter 1

“The Duke of Coldwell? Are you absolutely sure you heard your father correctly?” Esme Montague’s voice came out in a high-pitched squeal. “You cannot have that right, Isabella, truly you cannot.”

“I heard my father as clearly as I hear you now, Esme. The whole thing is true, absolutely true.” Lady Isabella Tate could hear the tremor in her own voice.

She was terrified and had been for three successive days. In all that time, she had had nobody to talk to on the matter, not even her own mother. As always, her mother was of little use when it came to her daughter’s defense. The Countess of Upperton was utterly afraid of her husband, the Earl, and would never have gone against him, even if her own daughter’s life depended on it.

“And when did he say it to you? When did your father tell you that you must marry?”

“On Sunday after church. Really, not an hour after I saw you last, my father sat me down and told me that I am to marry a monster. I do not know how I have managed these last days without you, my dear Esme. I have felt so alone.”

Lady Isabella thought back to the afternoon which seemed to have changed everything in her world. Every Sunday, after church, Isabella took refuge in her own room for the afternoon until dinner was served. It was the only day when her father would undoubtedly be at Upperton Hall all day long, the only day he would not be out somewhere on the estate barking instructions at servants, tenants, and stewards alike.

For Isabella, Sundays had their routines, and she had grown accustomed to them. She always kept a good supply of books in her room and seemed to do most of her reading on that day in particular.

However, on the Sunday in question, she had been in her room not more than ten minutes before there came a sharp knock at the door.

Isabella, who had been reclining on her bed to read, still wearing the fine gown that she had worn to church, hurriedly rose to her feet and straightened her clothing out. She hastily raised a hand to her hair, checking that her dark curls were still neatly tucked away, before calling out that her visitor might enter.

“Isabella,” her father said in his customary tone, a sharp and clipped manner, as he entered the room.

“Papa?” Isabella answered, entirely surprised by her father’s presence.

Isabella could not remember the last time her father had visited her in her own room. She thought, perhaps, that it had been a good many years.

Her brother Anthony, who at just fourteen years was almost six years younger than Isabella, had taken the lion's share of his father's attention from the day he had been born. He was, of course, the son her father had always longed for and, from that moment onwards, Isabella had almost ceased to exist.

"I should like you to come down and speak to me in my study as soon as possible, please," he said in the same gruff tone before smartly turning and leaving the room, shutting the door tight behind him.

Isabella had thought instantly that she had done something wrong and spent the next several minutes racking her brains for what on earth it could be. It had been a long time since Isabella had misbehaved; after all, she was not a child anymore. And yet her father's tone could only suggest that she was in some sort of trouble.

And so it was, her insides quaking utterly, that she made her way down to her father's study. As fearful as she felt, Isabella knew that she ought not to keep him waiting long. Nobody who kept her father waiting came out of it unscathed.

By the time she had reached the study door and gently knocked upon

it, Isabella could feel a thin film of perspiration, cold and prickly, on the smooth skin of her back. She was truly afraid.

“Ah, good,” her father said the moment he set eyes on her. “Now, come closer. Stand at my desk,” he instructed when she seemed set to loiter by the door as if ready to make a hasty escape.

Without a word, Isabella did as she was told, moving as silently as a ghost to stand before her father who was sitting comfortably on the other side of his desk, his elbows leaning heavily and his fingers pressed together, forming a steeple.

“I have some news for you, Isabella,” he began, and she thought, for a moment, that he smiled.

Perhaps, after all, she was not in trouble. Perhaps this news was even good news of some sort, something to look forward to and be glad of.

“News, Papa?” Isabella said quietly.

“Yes,” her father said, taking his elbows from the desk and leaning back heavily into the high-backed chair. “You are to be married, my dear.”

“Married?” Isabella’s voice was a little louder than ordinarily it might be.

“Yes, married,” her father confirmed in a level tone which suggested she ought not to begin complaining.

“But Papa, I have not met a young man that I wish to marry.”

“That is of little matter to me, Isabella,” he said dismissively.

“You do not care who it is I marry, Papa?” Isabella said, sensing already that she was tiptoeing onto dangerous ground.

“On the contrary, Isabella,” her father said, his watery dark eyes fixed on her in a way which made her shrink a little. “I have very carefully picked the most suitable husband for you. He is wealthy and titled, and I am content that he shall be able to look after you very well for the rest of your life. He will, in fact, be able to pick up where I am soon to leave off.” He attempted a smile and, in doing so, reminded Isabella of a hunting animal of some sort; a wolf, perhaps.

“And might I ask, Sir, who it is I am to marry?” Isabella said, careful to moderate her tone just enough to put her back in the realm of the dutiful daughter, however much her instincts told her that all was not well.

“You are to marry the Duke of Coldwell,” her father replied with a certain amount of relish.

“The Duke of …?” Isabella could not finish; her throat had gone dry, and her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth.

“Coldwell, yes, that is right.”

“But Papa, is he not a good deal older than I am?”

“He is but eight and thirty, Isabella. Eighteen years between man and wife is nothing to be squeamish about, is it?” Isabella could sense that her father was beginning to lose patience with her.

“No, perhaps that is not something to be squeamish about, Papa,” she said and could hardly believe that she continued to speak. “But there is the matter of him being a reclusive monster, renowned throughout the county for being such; that might well be something to be squeamish about, might it not?”

“How dare you?” Already, her father was rising to his feet behind his desk.

“Papa, please,” Isabella said beseechingly, holding both hands out before her and hoping that it would placate him. “I only speak so because I am afraid.”

“You have nothing to be afraid of,” her father said, mercifully retaking

his seat behind his desk. “I have spoken to the man on many occasions, and I do not find him a monster myself.”

Isabella could not take that as any kind of reassurance. Her father was not a good or kind man, and so any recommendation from him was to be viewed with the utmost suspicion, especially regarding another man’s character, not to mention his appearance.

“I see,” Isabella said quietly, her mind racing as she thought how best to proceed.

“And as I have already said, he is a wealthy and titled man. A Duke, no less. There, you will have married very well indeed, will you not?”

“Forgive me, Papa, but is there no other man in the county you might have settled upon as a husband for me? Is there no other who has come to your attention in that regard?” Isabella felt desperate.

“None who has the resources of the Duke, I am afraid,” he responded, flapping his hand dismissively. “And so, I cannot settle for any man other than the Duke, for he is the only one who is content not only to forego any dowry I might be expected to make but to make a settlement upon *you* instead.”

Isabella swallowed hard; at that moment, she knew there would be no escape for her. Although the thing was hardly mentioned, Isabella was

very well aware that her father's estate, the grand Earldom of Upperton, had been failing for many years.

And, above all things, her father was a proud man. He believed wholeheartedly in the aristocracy and the maintenance of family lines and titles, blood, and wealth. More than anything, the Earl of Upperton wanted to hand down a fine and thriving estate to his son. All that mattered to the Earl was his son, and Isabella knew it.

There would be nothing that she could say now to save herself because her father would always put Anthony and his happiness before Isabella and her own.

"Oh, my dear Isabella," Esme Montague said the moment that Isabella had finished telling her every part of the conversation she had had with her father. "It would seem that you were not at all mistaken." Tears shone in Esme's eyes.

"No, please do not cry, Esme. If you cry, then I shall cry. I shall be sunk then, and I do not want to be sunk," Isabella said bravely.

"Forgive me; I shall be brave for your sake." Esme dabbed at the corner of her eye with a neatly embroidered handkerchief. "After all, it is you who has an ordeal ahead, not me."

"Perhaps it shall not be such an ordeal, after all, Esme," Isabella began

with false hope. “Perhaps the man will be very different upon meeting. After all, all we have to judge him on is what we have heard over the years. Neither one of us knows him since *nobody* knows him. Perhaps he is not a monster.”

“Perhaps he is not a monster in his ways, my dear,” Esme said gently.

“But he is very likely to be a monster in his appearance, is he not?” Isabella said, her hope dying. “Is that not what the entire county says about him? That he is too repulsive to be out in society, and so he has shut himself away all these years in that dreadful, overgrown estate.”

And it was true, that was exactly what the people of the county said of him; those who were inclined to gossip, at any rate.

It was said that the Duke had been disfigured many years before, so badly that nobody could look upon him without fear. And because of his disfigurement, the Duke had hidden himself away, refusing all company, intent to see out his years alone.

As children, Isabella and Esme had often told stories of this monster. He had been a feature of their lives, dropping in and out of their world on a whim, making an appearance whenever they felt the need to frighten themselves in that childish, excited way of young girls.

And all the county knew that his estate, the Duchy estate of Coldwell,

was a place out of bounds to all. Its very perimeter was so overgrown with the tallest trees and the densest, sharpest hawthorns, that the hall seemed almost as a fortress, a place from a dreadful fairytale that ought never to be entered by any good soul.

Isabella had seen great swathes of the perimeter for herself over the years, the dense greenery so commonplace to her that it was almost beneath notice. It had been that way for as long as she could remember.

“I wonder why it is that the Duke has never taken a wife before?” Esme said, breaking the silence.

“If he is so disfigured, then I hardly think that there would be a woman who would marry him,” Isabella answered and shuddered involuntarily.

“But so many women, as you now well know, do not have a choice in these matters. So many women of our class are simply forced to marry a man of their father’s choosing, and so it would seem unusual that the Duke has not sought to find a wife by these means before.”

“Perhaps he has not yet met a man who is so close to financial penury that he would consider selling his own daughter. For, in the end, it is nothing more and nothing less.”

“And your father *is* such a man, is he not?” Even after all these years, Esme still spoke with caution when she spoke of Isabella’s father.

“Oh yes, he is such a man,” Isabella said with such an open display of distaste that Esme seemed taken aback. “And not only is he a man lacking funds, but he is a man who cares only for his son. I am nothing more than a commodity to be bartered. I am something to be used so that my spoiled little brother can live the full life of an Earl when the time comes. My life is sacrificed to his, is it not?”

“I know it is often so, my dear, but I think this is the cruelest case of such a thing I have ever seen.” Isabella’s open hostility in talking of her father had given Esme the confidence to speak fearlessly herself. “For not only is your father bartering you away as so many fathers have done over the years, but he is bartering you away to a monster, one that the rest of the county would fear to set eyes on.”

“And there is not one thing I can do about it,” Isabella said with a sigh, blinking hard lest the tears finally fall.

And she was determined, above all things that she would not cry about it. Crying would do her no good whatsoever, and she knew it.

“Can your mother not be petitioned to help you?” Esme said in a tone which suggested that even she did not believe such a thing would come to pass.

“I think you know my mother as well as I know her, Esme. She is a weak creature at the best of times, but really, when it comes to something of such magnitude, I cannot think for a moment that she would open her mouth to speak once on the subject.”

“Then it would seem that there is nothing to be done,” Esme said, her voice full of pain at the thought that she was soon to lose a friend.

“Unless, of course, I think of something,” Isabella said doubtfully. “Unless I think of something very soon.”

Chapter 2

The only person in all the world who knew of Isabella's plan was Esme. The two had walked the perimeter of the Upperton Estate and talked the whole thing through.

Isabella had known it would not do to talk in the house, even if they assumed themselves to be alone in the drawing room. Her father's servants lived in fear of the Earl, either fear of his wrath or fear of dismissal, without reference, on a whim.

As such, many of them had turned to taking little stories to the Earl about this, that, and the other, in hopes of somehow generally keeping themselves safe. Isabella did not blame them for it as she did, in part at least, empathize with them.

And so it was that she and Esme had put together a daring plan for escape as they had walked alone on the estate in the cool, early spring air.

And it *was* daring too, for it would require a certain amount of lone travel, something that Isabella had never done before. Furthermore, it would also require reliance on a long-forgotten family member who may, or may not, be on Isabella's side in the thing.

Isabella knew that she would have to put her plan into action almost immediately. A second interview with her father had left her in no doubt that there was not a moment to waste.

“Now that you have had a little time in which to digest the information I gave you last week, I think it is time to discuss the practical arrangements for the wedding,” her father said matter-of-factly.

Their second discussion on the matter did not take place in his study but in the drawing room with her mother in attendance.

The Countess of Upperton sat meekly at one end of a pretty, lemon yellow couch, perched as if she dared not relax entirely. It was a demeanour so often used by Isabella’s mother that she thought it must be, more than anything else, habit.

Whilst Isabella knew that there was much to pity in her mother’s circumstances, she thought that there was more to pity in her own at that moment. The fact that her mother, she knew, would say nothing in her defense, made her quietly angry. Would there ever come a time when her mother would raise her head up for the benefit of her firstborn child? Isabella very much doubted it.

“I see,” Isabella said, knowing that there would be little argument to be had.

“You are to marry the Duke of Coldwell four weeks from now and so, I assume, there is much for you and your mother to discuss regarding preparations.” He smiled in a manner which seemed to jauntily dismiss what he likely thought of as the fripperies of female life.

Isabella wanted to scream; she wanted to stand up and overturn the oval mahogany table and listen to the satisfying smash of the teapot and crockery as everything hit the floor.

Why on earth would her father think that she would be excited about such preparations? He was condemning her to marry a monster, surely it mattered not what she wore. And if this Duke, this ruined, recluse of a man, saw fit to purchase a bride he had never met, she thought it unlikely that he very much cared what she wore either.

“I cannot think that there will be much to prepare,” Isabella said although she was careful to keep her tone respectful.

“Well, there will be your gown, my dear,” the Countess piped up meekly with a frozen smile on her face.

“Oh yes, my gown.” Isabella returned the frozen smile with one of her own. “Well, I am happy to leave such excitement to you, Mama.”

“As long as you understand that you will be well turned out on that

day. I will not have you giving Elliot Covington any reason to turn you away at the last minute. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa," Isabella said.

She wondered at the idea of having to make herself beautiful for a man whose face, it was said, was so disfigured that he could not be seen out in society. And yet still it was Isabella, the powerless woman, who had to make herself pleasing. It was she who must hope that the monster would find *her* attractive. How she despised the world she lived in.

Isabella had the beginnings of an idea and, as she let the remainder of the dreadful meeting wash over her whilst she kept silent, she knew that she would have to work on her plan immediately.

Although she had much of her plan worked out before she had seen Esme, to speak it out loud seemed to polish it and make it something more achievable in her eyes.

Isabella had a plan to run to Ireland.

The Countess of Upperton had, Isabella knew, an aunt who lived in Ireland. It was an aunt whom Isabella had the vaguest recollection of meeting once when she was a little girl. The lady had seemed quite elderly to her then, but she supposed that it was a facet of youth.

When you were little, everybody seemed so much older.

Isabella could barely remember the woman's face but had a general impression that she had been very kind and sweet. And, with no other family to speak of who would not give her away immediately, Isabella could think of none other to run to.

From the moment she had hatched the plan, Isabella had been in a highly agitated and nervous state. She had first to discover the exact whereabouts of her great aunt, which necessitated a clandestine search of her mother's papers.

With a household full of quiet, nervous servants, to find an opportunity to search her mother's room was no easy task. Her heart had thundered throughout the entire thing, and she wondered how, in the end, she would manage to go through with her plan if this simple task made her so nervous.

With the address secured and high hopes that her aunt had not moved to some other place in Ireland, there were other plans to make. Esme had procured a timetable of sailings from Liverpool to Ireland and had secretly passed her the paper, which had been folded so many times it was almost unreadable when she had opened it out. Still, she could see that there were regular sailings from Liverpool to Ireland and the timetable, tucked away inside her velvet drawstring purse, gave her quiet fortitude.

As far as making her way from her home in Hertfordshire to Liverpool, Esme had been of great assistance. Being free to make inquiries, Esme had sought out the best route to take.

“You will have to travel post-chaise from St Albans. There will be several changes to make on the journey, and it will take some days, but you will be in Liverpool before anybody thinks to look for you there,” Esme had said with some excitement.

Esme was the finest friend she had ever known. Despite the sadness that she was about to lose her friend to another country altogether, Esme was still determined to help her. She would rather see Isabella hundreds of miles away than have her in the same county, desperate and afraid in a marriage she did not want.

“St. Albans?” Isabella said, wondering how best to get there.

After all, she knew she could not take one of her father’s carriages, nor could she risk having a horse saddled on the pretense of taking an early morning ride.

Whilst this would not have been entirely out of the common way, Isabella knew that there was too much at stake to have a curious servant wonder why it was she was taking a small bag of belongings on her early morning ride. It simply could not be done.

“I can think of no other way of secretly going to St Albans but to walk there,” Isabella had said when the two of them had discussed the problem at length.

“It is but four miles away, and it would, in the end, very likely be the best solution,” Esme said thoughtfully. “But I do not think that it would be wise to walk it in daylight. You risk exactly the same exposure as you would in taking the horse, would you not?”

“Yes, any number of people might see me making my way. And any of the servants might see me leaving Upperton with a bag.”

“As uncomfortable as it might be, I think you might have to leave in the middle of the night. You must be ready to make your way silently out of Upperton Hall and into the darkness. It fills me with dread on your account, my dear, but I think it is the only way.” Esme looked dreadfully concerned.

“It *is* the only way, Esme.” Isabella reached for her hand and squeezed it hard. “Whatever am I going to do without you?”

“You cannot think of that now; you must not.” Esme blinked hard, and Isabella knew she had tears pricking her eyes. “You must think only of the plan and how best to execute it. The two of us will be friends always, have no doubt of that. Wherever you are in Ireland, I shall

write to you every day."

"At least we shall have that, Esme," Isabella said brightly. "Which is likely more than I should be allowed if I am to stay and marry the monster."

"You think it is likely he would not allow you to even correspond with me?" Esme seemed surprised as if she had not previously thought of such a thing.

"It is not a risk I am prepared to take."

"No indeed, nor shall you take it." Esme became practical once more. "For you shall have courage and execute your plan perfectly."

And yet, in the middle of the night, as Isabella crept down the main staircase with her small bag of possessions, she did not feel at all courageous; she felt terrified.

She had decided to come down the main staircase rather than using the back staircase, the narrow staircase used by the servants. Isabella thought it more likely that she might run into one of the servants at that hour than a member of her own family.

And the butler and housekeeper would never allow the rest of the staff to wander at will through the main part of Upperton Hall until it came

five o'clock in the morning and their work began.

Still, despite the fact that she could not imagine who she would happen upon in the middle of the night on the main staircase, Isabella held her breath. She felt a little lightheaded, and her hands were cold and clammy, her grip on the small bag of possessions slipping just a little.

She had an awful feeling that the bag would slip from her grasp altogether and fall noisily down the rest of the staircase, alerting the whole household to her escape. But, in the end, it had not.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Isabella paused in the darkness, her eyes straining to see by the thinnest shards of moonlight. Her eyes began to slowly adjust to the gloom, and she could see no sign that she was anything other than alone in the great hallway.

And yet, she had the most awful feeling.

Isabella waited just a moment longer, determined not to panic or rush things. She could hear nothing, nor see any movement in the darkness. Quite why she had a prickling sensation at the back of her neck, she could not say, although she assumed it must be on account of her heightened excitement and nerves.

Finally, she stepped off the bottom stair and crept silently across the tiles of the entrance hall. The only thing she could hear was the rustle of her own gown as its hem slid across the floor. She paused for a moment, thinking even that amount of noise was too much. Isabella was but three strides away from the great door.

Her heart was beating so hard, and her breathing was so ragged, but she knew she must go on. She must get out of that house. Finally, she made to take the final steps, knowing that she could wait no longer.

“I think you forgot something.” The voice came from behind her, and Isabella almost screamed.

“Anthony?” she said and turned slowly in the darkness.

“Yes, it is.” Isabella and her brother had never been friends, and she wondered if there was any way to appeal to his better nature. “Surely you will need your timetable of the sailings from Liverpool to Ireland.” She could hear the amusement in his young voice; how cruel he sounded.

As he took a few steps towards her, Isabella could see that her brother was holding the much-folded little timetable in his hand. In her heart of hearts, she knew that he was not about to hand it to her and that he was there simply to cruelly taunt her.

“Anthony, you have been through my things to find that, have you not? You have been into my purse,” Isabella said reproachfully.

“Sister, I do hope you are not about to try to teach me about the rights and wrongs of such a thing when you yourself are clearly nothing more than a liar and a cheat who would see your family struggling in the dirt rather than do your duty.”

Isabella knew that her escape had been thwarted. There would be no appealing to her brother’s better nature, for that young man of just fourteen years did not have one. He was nothing more than a younger version of their dreadful father, and she knew it.

“So, you would also see me married to a monster to ensure that you have every luxury in life?” Isabella said, staving off feelings of pure hatred.

“It is your duty.”

“And what is your duty towards me? Or does nobody in this dreadful house have a duty towards my safety and happiness at all?”

“You are but a woman, Isabella. You do not have any right to expect such a thing,” he spoke with casual haughtiness.

He really was a very self-important little man.

“Then you will see why it is that I must leave,” she said and reached for the timetable, despite the fact that she knew he would withdraw it the moment he saw her move.

“You are not going anywhere, Isabella. I will not allow it.”

“You are but fourteen years, and you do not have a right to allow or disallow anything in my world,” Isabella said angrily.

“Why do you not understand that, regardless of your greater years, you are nothing in this household? I will one day be Earl of this great estate, and you will be nobody. You are below me, beneath me, and you always will be.”

Isabella turned and ran for the door. However, just as she reached for the great bolts which had been thrown across dutifully by the butler, she felt her brother seize her mercilessly by the hair and pull her backward.

Isabella did not scream for she did not want to alert anybody to the struggle which was taking place as she bravely fought off her brother. However, her brother yelled and barked until footsteps could be heard coming from all around.

The hallway quickly began to fill with worried-looking servants, none

of whom would have done a thing to rescue her from her brother's cruel treatment. And then, worst of all, she heard the booming voice of her father bellowing from the top of the great staircase.

"What on earth is going on?"

Chapter 3

As the carriage approached the edge of the Coldwell Estate, Isabella let her eyes fall to her lap. She had seen the tangle of trees and thick hawthorns surrounding the grounds and could not bear to look as they approached the thick iron gates.

She had seen the gates before; as a child, she had often peered at them in hopes of seeing something exciting. But she had always been thwarted, for there was nothing to see.

The driveway turned so sharply that an observer at the gates could see no more than a few feet of wide gravel path before it turned and was obscured by yet more thick, twisted hawthorns and extraordinarily tall leylandiis.

The estate really was cut off from the rest of the world, and Isabella wondered if she would ever pass out through the immense gates once she had entered. If she was to be a prisoner in that place for the rest of her life, then it might as well be her tomb, for her life was over.

“Good morning, Lord Upperton.” A man who had opened the gate approached the window of their carriage. “How nice to see you again.”

The man was certainly no servant, despite having unlocked and opened the gates wide with his own hands.

He was a well-dressed man, clearly a gentleman, and Isabella wondered for a moment if he might possibly be the Duke. He was very tall and broadly built, with the vaguest stoop to his bearing as if he were perpetually about to duck. He had pale blond hair, so pale it was hard to tell if it was graying, and pale blue-gray eyes.

But his face was certainly not ruined. It was not handsome, either, but there was no sign of the devastation she had come to expect. He was, perhaps, nearing forty years and so would have easily been the same age as the Duke.

“Ah, Maguire,” her father said shortly. “I trust everything is ready.”

“Indeed, it is, Lord Upperton.” The man nodded at the Earl matter-of-factly, not ingratiating himself to the man at all, despite the fact that he had just been spoken to like a servant.

Unless a man was of equal or greater title to her father, he spoke to them all in the same fashion. For a moment, in spite of her own fears, Isabella felt pleased to see a man who refused, albeit silently, to be cowed by the Earl of Upperton.

“Well, we shall ride on through to the Duke’s chapel and get on with

things," the Earl said and moved away from the window, leaning back in his seat and turning his head in the opposite direction from Mr Maguire before loudly thumping at the ceiling of the carriage with his cane.

How rude he was; how terribly rude.

However, Isabella had greater worries on her mind than her father's appalling attitude. Mr Maguire was clearly not the Duke, and so she knew that she still had to face the monster.

As the carriage rumbled on up the winding gravel driveway, Isabella was too afraid to look up. She imagined such a ruined place, a place full of cobwebs and fear and sadness, and she did not want to see it. She wanted to be herself just a few minutes longer and yet, as she looked down, all she could see was the gown that her mother had the seamstress make for her.

"My dear, it shall need to be fitted again. The seamstress is here, and she is waiting in the morning room. Come, I shall stay with you and make sure that everything fits perfectly." Her mother had approached her with such a tone of lightness that Isabella simply stared at her dumbfounded.

"I care not if the gown fits, Mama," Isabella said angrily. "And I cannot understand why it is you expect me to be full of the excitement

of the young, blushing bride when we both know that there is to be no excitement in my life. There is to be nothing but the fear and horror of being married to a monster, a man I have not yet even met."

"Please keep your voice down, my dear." Lady Upperton looked as frightened as a startled dormouse.

"Yes, of course. After all, why should I do anything to make *your* life difficult, Mother?"

"If you continue in this vein, you shall make *all* our lives difficult." Her mother's tone needled her greatly.

"And so, I am to be the sacrifice in your eyes too, am I? I am to curtsy and smile and be pleased for a gown I wish never to wear, just so that everybody's lives can be made so much simpler. Go away, I do not wish you in the room when I am trying on this dreadful gown," Isabella said and strode off in the direction of the morning room.

Much to her dismay, the seamstress had made the most beautiful wedding gown imaginable. It was made of the purest ivory coloured silk, with an overlay of the most intricate lace Isabella had ever seen. The wide silk ribbon at the Empire line was simple, showing off the lace to its best advantage.

And her maid of many years, with tears in her eyes, had tamed her

dark brown curls, twisting them up onto the back of her head and securing them with the prettiest little combs. And those curls which framed her face were glossier than she had ever seen them.

How Isabella wished herself as ugly as the monster. How she wished she had nothing to offer this dreadful man, for she felt sure that he had nothing to offer her.

In the end, tiring of the sight of her beautiful gown, Isabella finally looked up. The driveway was most awkward, bending this way and that seemingly for its full length. And either side it was lined with tall leylandii trees, effectively screening the driveway off from the rest of the estate. It was as if the Duke would even hide from an approaching visitor.

As the driveway began to straighten and the trees thinned out, Isabella knew that they were finally approaching Coldwell Hall. Her mouth was horribly dry, and her head pounded dreadfully. She could hardly think of a time when she had felt so unwell.

Knowing that she must finally lay eyes upon the place that was to be her prison, she turned to look out of the window and awaited her first view of the hall.

Her father remained silent at her side, sitting on the furthest seat from her. The Earl had spoken not one word to her throughout their

journey, not even to try to reassure her that all would be well. What sort of a father was he?

When Coldwell Hall came into view, it did so quite suddenly. And not only was its appearance sudden that was so surprising.

It was not the dilapidated, ruined place she had imagined. It was an immense, wonderful looking mansion built in the old style, with rounded towers at either end. It was built of a dark gray stone, and ivy and wisteria clung to the front, winding its way around the many stone mullioned windows.

And yet it was clear that the ivy and the wisteria were not neglected, rather they were neatly clipped, giving the whole building a magical appearance.

From the outside, at least, Coldwell Hall was a fairy tale; a good one, rather than a bad one.

The carriage continued around the side of the Great Hall, the driveway not becoming any narrower as it snaked its way down to a small, stone built family chapel.

The building was surrounded by magnolia trees, and Isabella could see the beginnings of new leaves and tiny buds and thought that the little chapel must look magnificent when the trees were in bloom.

Standing at the side of one of the columns of the front porch of the little chapel was a minister. A man of God who was going to marry her to a monster against her will. Was there really nobody to help her?

The moment the carriage drew to a halt, the Earl leaped out and darted around to open her door. He took her hand and gently helped her down as if he were the finest father in creation. He smiled warmly, although Isabella noted that he did not for a moment meet her eyes.

Feeling hot and sick, Isabella stared down at the gravel until she heard the sound of approaching hooves. She looked up to see the man who had let them into the estate, Mr Maguire, drawing up on horseback. He had no doubt ridden back from the gate.

“Well, it looks as if we are all here,” the Minister said and rubbed his hands together hard as if it were a cold day.

Isabella fixed the Minister with a stare and realized that he was nervous. Whether he was nervous of sacrificing a young woman as he must surely know he was about to, or nervous to be in the company of the monster, Isabella could not say. Either way, she found she could not care for his feelings.

“Yes, yes. The time has come,” her father said as if he was trying to coax his guests into dinner rather than forcing his own daughter towards the worst day of her life.

“Right … well …” With a last look at Isabella, the Minister turned his back and dashed inside the small chapel.

When next she saw him, he was already in position at the top end of a small aisle. No doubt he was ready to hear their hasty vows.

The Earl held out his arm for her to take, but she did not take it. Isabella looked at him with every ounce of the hatred she felt for the man. If there were one good thing to come out of this day, it would be that she would no longer be under his control.

Yes, she would be under the control of the monster, but at least she could turn her back on her father forever. She could turn her back on her entire family and the Upperton Estate, never to set eyes on it again.

Turning to look away from him, Isabella marched up the aisle. She could hear her father’s footsteps as he hurried to keep up, doing what he could to maintain appearances. But maintain them for whose sake? After all, there was hardly anybody there.

Besides her father, Mr Maguire, and the Minister, there was only the

bride and groom themselves. What did she care what any of them thought?

Isabella felt suddenly defiant, almost brave. She strode towards the Duke fearlessly. She stared at his back as he looked resolutely towards the front of the little chapel, neither looking left nor right. Obviously, he did not care about the appearance of his bride. But clearly, he did not care about her personality either or, indeed, any little detail of her.

Of course, Isabella felt certain that her sudden flash of anger-fueled bravery could only exist whilst the Duke looked ahead of him.

As she stood at his side, her veil was already away from her face. As she had climbed out of the carriage, Isabella had not bothered to pull it over her maiden cheeks. Perhaps that was something that her mother might have attended to, had she deigned to go with them and see her only daughter married.

Isabella brazenly turned her head to look at the Duke. He was a good deal taller than she, that much she could almost feel as they stood side-by-side. His hair was a dark ash brown, thick and smooth. And, although she knew him to be eighteen years her senior, his fine, olive coloured skin seemed to proclaim otherwise.

For a moment, Isabella stood in some confusion. Was this the Duke of

Coldwell? Was this the monster of the stories that she and Esme had shared, had terrified each other with when they were little?

Surely there must be some mistake. The man who stood at her side, still resolutely staring towards the front of the chapel, was a most handsome man indeed. He had a very strong face in profile, and she could see that his eyes were rather a beautiful green. He had thick brows which were dark, giving him an almost Mediterranean look.

If this was, indeed, the ruined Duke, a man who kept to the walls of his mansion perpetually, then his skin must be naturally dark.

As Isabella studied him quite shamelessly, she thought it an odd musing. What did it matter how he looked? She did not want to marry a stranger, and that was all.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness …” the Minister began without so much as the singing of a hymn to make this anything like a real wedding ceremony.

Isabella barely listened, and twice the Minister had to prompt her to make her responses when giving her vows. She did not want to hear it; she did not want to listen as her individuality was ripped away from her, only to be replaced with the lifelong title of wife. The monster’s wife.

Again, she looked to her side at the man she was marrying and wondered how it could be that his face was so handsome. As far as she could tell, he was not a monster at all.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.” She was vaguely aware that the seal had most definitely been set upon her own fate.

She turned to scowl at the Minister. The shameful man knew exactly what he had done.

“You may kiss your bride, Your Grace,” the Minister said, finally confirming for her that she had, indeed, married the Duke of Coldwell.

For a moment, the Duke did not move. He stood still as he had done throughout the ceremony, still staring at some far-off point in the distance. In the end, Isabella heard the Duke nervously clear his throat as he finally turned to face his wife.

At that moment, when she saw him face on for the first time, Isabella almost screamed. She had not been expecting him to be scarred after all. She had expected the right side of his face to be as smooth and as handsome as the left.

But she did not scream, she could not. The idea that this man was about to kiss her was more than she could stand and, with a deepening sense of panic and her breaths coming harder and harder,

spots appeared before her eyes.

Isabella tried to blink, tried to stay upright but, in the end, she could not. Blackness overtook her, and she was unconscious before she hit the flagstones of the chapel floor.

Chapter 4

When she finally awoke, it was to find herself laying in a large and comfortable bed. Her head was throbbing horribly, and she had no idea where she was.

With that sense of dread that one gets when waking in a strange place, Isabella determined not to open her eyes fully and, instead, simply peered through the tiniest gap. She did not want anybody present to know that she had awoken, at least not until she had her bearings and her memories intact once more.

When she realized that she was alone in the room, Isabella let her eyes fly wide open. She tried to sit up in the bed, despite the throbbing pain. She reached up to touch the back of her head and could feel a pronounced lump there. She must have hit her head surely, or been hit.

Slowly, her memories began to glide back in.

“Oh, dear Lord,” she said, remembering everything with such a sense of desolation.

She was a married woman; that much she knew. And she had not married the handsome man with the green eyes and the dark skin. No,

she truly had been married away to the monster.

With a shudder, she recalled the sight which had finally made her succumb to unconsciousness. Once again, beads of cold perspiration erupted on her back as she remembered the sight she would never forget.

When the Duke had turned to face her in the chapel, the ruination of the right side of his face was plain. The skin was a mixture of angry red and purple with raised lines of silvery white, shiny skin. He had been burned; that much was clear.

The burn had taken almost all that side of his face, and she could see that it would continue down his neck, somewhere beneath his smart necktie. Perhaps the scarring had taken all that side of his body, there was no way of knowing.

His hair seemed largely intact on that side, barring a small, shiny patch of skin by his left temple. Apart from that, the only other part of that side of his face still intact, still as it ought to have been, was his other eye. It stood out starkly, beautiful and green, against the dark and angry skin of his face.

Isabella remembered that in those last moments before the world grew dark, she had stared into those green eyes, and they had fixed her with such a look of pain that she could not bear it.

The door to the chamber opened suddenly, and Isabella gasped.

“Who are you?” she said in a high-pitched voice which gave her away for being almost overcome with fear.

“My name is Kitty Smith, Your Grace. My master sent me in to take care of you,” the woman said and closed the door behind her before walking into the room.

Kitty Smith was an extraordinarily thin woman in late middle age. Her silvery gray hair was pulled back into a harsh bun at the back of her head and her dark gown covered by a brilliant white apron silently informed Isabella that Kitty was a maid.

“Your Grace?” Isabella said, sounding startled.

“You are the Duchess of Coldwell now, Your Grace.” Despite having a thin, almost gaunt face, Kitty Smith’s smile was full of warmth.

“Oh yes, of course,” Isabella said absentmindedly. “But I do not want to be called *Your Grace*.”

“There is no other way for me to address you, not respectfully.”

“Yes, I suppose that is true.” Isabella tried again to sit up in the bed. “I

just feel that I am never to hear my name spoken aloud again. But perhaps a prisoner does not need to hear her own name. Perhaps she does not need to be reminded of the person she once was."

"You must not see yourself as a prisoner." Kitty Smith hurried over to the bed and hastily rearranged the pillows before helping Isabella to sit up a little straighter and lean against them.

"Forgive me. I am being melancholy. I ought not to have said such a thing before you," Isabella said apologetically.

"Not at all, Your Grace," Kitty said kindly. "I daresay it can be an unsettling thing to become suddenly married."

"Married to a man one has never met before." Isabella knew she was saying too much, especially to a maid, but she felt she had no choice.

She did not know where she was within the walls of Coldwell Hall. The mansion had looked immense from the outside, almost like a castle, and she thought she could have been anywhere. She could have been behind any of the windows that she had seen from the outside or a hundred more that were undoubtedly around the back.

It was a thing that she could hardly have worked out, given that the heavy brocade curtains were firmly closed. Despite the fact that two large oil lamps lit the room very well indeed, Isabella had the

impression that it was not full night outside. Perhaps she had not been unconscious for very long at all.

“How long have I been here?” Isabella said, keen to change the subject.

“Some three or four hours, Your Grace. And you have been unconscious for that whole time. You must have hit your head very hard indeed, although the physician says that you will recover completely; he is sure of it.”

“Oh, I shall live,” Isabella said, making it sound like a terrible prospect.

“Oh, Your Grace.” The older woman’s eyes showed most plainly that she felt terribly sorry for Isabella. “You must not think like that.”

“Forgive me, but I feel so very lost.”

“It is understandable, but you will soon grow used to it. Coldwell Hall is a beautiful place, a wonderful home for you.”

“This room certainly seems very nice, Kitty.” Isabella fought hard to make ordinary conversation. “Not at all what I had expected.”

The room was very large and the immense four-poster bed its central

feature. The bed was ornately made and wider than any place she had ever slept in her life.

She could not quite discern the colour of the walls by the light of the oil lamps but thought that they were of a light hue. No doubt, in the daytime, the room seemed very light and bright indeed, especially when the curtains were pulled back from what promised to be very large windows.

“Is it not, Your Grace?”

“No, I suppose I had not imagined that Coldwell Hall would be so well looked after. You see, I had this idea that it would be …” She paused, seeing a look of sadness on Kitty’s face. “Sorry, you must forgive me. I must have hit my head harder than I thought.”

“You need not apologize, Your Grace,” Kitty said. “I am sure that you would not be the only person in the county to think that Coldwell Hall was an old ruin of a place, sinister and decrepit.”

“In truth, that is precisely what I had thought.” Isabella was too exhausted to find some way of successfully denying it. “And there is, of course, much unusual talk of Coldwell Hall and its master about the county. I suppose it is unavoidable, given that the Duke would seem to be something of a recluse.”

“He was never a recluse by choice, Your Grace,” Kitty went on sadly. “But merely circumstances.”

“Yes, I am quite sure.”

“He is a good man, really he is. I know that he is not easy to look upon in the beginning, but you soon come to forget it all.”

“Surely not!” Isabella regretted her words immediately. “I mean, forgive me, but the Duke’s disfigurement is so very extensive.”

“It is, but I promise you there will come a day when you will look at him and not even see it. You have only to give him a chance, and that is all.” There was wisdom in Kitty’s thin, lined face, and it gave Isabella a feeling of safety.

However, despite her polite smiles and nods, Isabella could not for a moment imagine ever looking upon that face and not seeing the scars. How could one look upon such devastation and not see it?

For a moment, Isabella was almost overcome with the desire to find out exactly what had happened to the Duke of Coldwell. She almost asked the maid outright before stopping herself, knowing that her curiosity at such a time was truly inappropriate.

“Have you worked here at Coldwell Hall for a long time, Kitty?” Once

again, Isabella deftly changed the subject.

“Longer than I care to remember, Your Grace.” Kitty chuckled as she made her way to a great mahogany dresser and opened one of the drawers. “I have been here more than thirty years since His Grace was nothing but a boy.”

“Then you must be very happy here, Kitty.”

“I could not imagine being more settled anywhere else. But perhaps that is because I do not know anything else anymore. I was but one and twenty when I first came here as lady’s maid to the last Duchess, His Grace’s mother.”

“You had done well to have such a position by that age, Kitty.”

“I had always wanted to be a lady’s maid; to fix a fine lady’s hair and attend to her wardrobe. When I first came to Coldwell Hall, it was my dream come true.” She turned from the dresser holding an immaculately white nightgown.

She seemed to have drifted off into thoughts of the past, to the days when she was a busy lady’s maid to a fine Duchess.

“How wonderful,” Isabella said as she tried to find some normality in the conversation.

“But it has been more than eighteen years since I have been able to undertake my old duties,” Kitty spoke sadly.

“I am terribly sorry.” Isabella realized that that must surely have been when the old Duchess had died.

Of course, she did not think she ought to ask for any further details until she had come to know Kitty Smith a little better. She was still so very out of sorts and most uncomfortable to be living in Coldwell Hall that she did not want to alienate her potential ally.

“Perhaps when you come to think about your own lady’s maid, Your Grace, you might consider me?” Kitty said a little shyly. “I realize that I am not a young woman anymore, but I have kept myself well informed of the current fashions and hairstyles.”

“I should be very pleased, Kitty,” Isabella said genuinely. “After all, you have done much to put me at my ease on a most difficult day.”

“I know it is difficult for you, Your Grace.” Kitty laid the beautiful nightgown out over the foot of the bed. “But things will settle down, I promise you. All will be well.”

As Kitty spoke, Isabella could feel her warmth. It was almost as if everything truly *would* be well, despite the fact that Isabella could see

no evidence of it.

“Kitty, is my father still here?” The sudden thought made Isabella sit bolt upright, her pillows tumbling left and right behind her and her head throbbing painfully.

“I am afraid he is not, Your Grace,” Kitty said, and Isabella could see the hint of disapproval in the woman’s eyes. It was disapproval that made Isabella warm to her all the more.

“If I were to hazard a guess, Kitty, I would say that my father was already stepping back into his carriage as I lay unconscious on the flagstones of the chapel.” Isabella heard the bitterness.

“I could not say, Your Grace. The Duke and Mr Maguire brought you straight over to the hall. His Grace carried you himself.” Kitty smiled as if the idea was most romantic. “And then he sent immediately for the physician. There was much hustle and bustle, and I cannot say that I saw your father in the hall at any point.”

“Quite so; my own experience tells me that I ought not to have assumed that he would have waited long enough to discover if I was even to live.” Isabella’s voice faltered, and she felt suddenly tearful and extremely sorry for herself.

It was not that she missed her father, nor even did she want him

there. It was just the idea that she was genuinely uncared for in this world. At least uncared for by anybody who could do anything to preserve her circumstances. If only Esme were there with her; if only she could hold her friend's hand for one last time. The thought of it finally made her cry. And it was the first time she had cried in all of it; from the moment her father had declared she would marry, these were the first tears she had shed.

Her resolve to remain steadfast had finally broken.

"There, there, my dear," Kitty said, and Isabella was relieved that she had chosen an endearment rather than *Your Grace*. "Just because you have left behind a family of little care does not mean that you have walked into another just the same. You will find people here who cared greatly, really you will. There is little wonder that you are afraid, what young woman would not be? And I shall help you in any way I can, and you will find that I am not the only one. You will be cared for, my dear, really you will." Kitty had perched awkwardly on the side of the bed and had reached out to take Isabella into her arms.

Whilst she was the maid, she was still an older woman with much more idea about the world and its goings-on than Isabella had. And, in the style of many an older woman, she could not bear to see a younger woman so distressed, so wanting for affection, and not provide it.

And, for her part, Isabella could not have been more grateful. She needed a friend more than anything in the world.

Chapter 5

When she awoke the following morning, Isabella felt a genuine sense of being trapped. Her marriage had finally settled into her properly, making her believe it was true; it really had happened.

There was no sign that Kitty had been into her yet, and so Isabella guessed it must still be very early. She'd slept so well she could hardly believe it. After Kitty had brought her a light meal of meat and warm potatoes, Isabella had climbed back into bed, and that was the last thing she could remember.

She could only think that it was the head injury which had allowed her to sleep so peacefully in such new and frightening circumstances.

Tentatively, Isabella raised her hand to the back of her head and was pleased to discover that the bump had receded a good deal. She felt a little more like her old self in terms of feeling substantial and strong physically.

Rising from the comfortable bed, Isabella tiptoed quietly over to the windows and drew back the heavy brocade curtains just enough to be able to peer out, hopefully unseen.

Before her lay a scene which took her breath away; she was staring

out what must surely be the back of Coldwell Hall onto beautiful, dense woodland. In truth, to describe it as woodland was to do it no justice for it was vast, reaching out to the very edges of the estate, at least as far as Isabella could see.

Realizing that she would not be seen by anybody below since there was nobody there, Isabella drew the curtains back wide at every window and let the early morning sunlight flood in. She turned to look back into the room, to see it in the daylight. Its cream walls made it light and airy, and the room was at least four times the size of the one she had inhabited back at Upperton Hall.

She wondered if that was to be her room forever, or if she would finally be expected to lay alongside the Duke. The very thought made her shudder.

To take her mind off things, Isabella turned back to the beautiful woodlands. She could see several paths beginning to run into it and thought that there must be many little walks in that place. She looked out across the treetops, that fresh, bright green of spring seeming to overwhelm her in a very fine way.

As she stared out, Isabella thought she could see some stonework high in the treetops. She knew, of course, that it could not be suspended there, but there must be a building of some sort. Straining to see better, Isabella thought she could make out a castellated ridge as if

what she was seeing was part of a castle turret. It was smaller, she was sure, and she could not see the thing entirely.

What a curious thing to have in the middle of woodland. Isabella wondered if she would ever be allowed outside; if she would be able to take one of the pathways into the woodland and find the building. Quite why she felt the sudden need to satisfy her curiosity when everything else in her life was so uncertain was quite beyond her.

The door opened with a creek, and Isabella spun around fast, her heartbeat quickening.

“It’s only me, Your Grace,” Kitty said with a smile. “I’m just bringing your water jug.” Kitty advanced into the room and set the jug on top of a beautiful mahogany washstand in the far corner.

Isabella could see tendrils of steam rising up from the jug and thought that the water must be wonderfully warm. How kind Kitty was.

“Thank you, Kitty.”

“Have you been awake for long, Your Grace?”

“Just a few minutes.” She turned away from the window and walked into the room. “I must admit that I slept very well indeed.”

“And how do you feel this morning?”

“In terms of health and vitality, Kitty, I feel very much better,” she said with a smile. “But I must admit, regarding my own heart and mind; I am still very much at sea.”

“Then let us hope that today brings a little more peace to your heart. Perhaps when you have had a chance to look around the place and see how beautiful it is, you might feel a little better.” Kitty smiled at her hopefully.

“Am I expected to stay in this room, Kitty?” Isabella said uncertainly.

“Goodness me, no.” Kitty laughed. “You really are not a prisoner.”

“Am I to go downstairs to take my breakfast?”

“You may have your breakfast wherever you choose. If you would prefer to have it here, then I shall bring it up to you. If you would prefer to go down to the breakfast room, I will escort you so that you know your way.”

Isabella mulled it over for a moment. It was true that she did want to have a look around the place, just so that she could shift the feeling that she was trapped inside that room forever. But she could not help wondering if the Duke would be taking his breakfast also. Could she

really sit with him and eat bacon and tomatoes without concern? And would he care to see her at all after she had fainted away at the sight of his face on their wedding day?

“Perhaps I will take my breakfast in my room this morning, Kitty. It might be wise to slowly get used to things, might it not?”

“As you wish,” Kitty said with a nod. “I shall go down and collect you some breakfast now and then help you dress when you are ready.”

Isabella was surprised by the amount she was able to eat, taking not only bacon and tomatoes but some toast and a large boiled egg also. Kitty had left her alone to eat, to enjoy her meal in private. When she poured the steaming hot tea into the cup, Isabella felt greatly refreshed.

She rose, holding her cup and saucer, and returned to the window to look out at the stone turret. She had wanted to ask Kitty about it but, as with everything else she had wanted to ask, she decided to wait until she knew her lady’s maid a little better.

When Kitty returned to help her dress, Isabella was already looking through the great wardrobe. She immediately found her own collection of gowns, but they were swamped by a very much larger collection. Isabella could not help wondering who the gowns belonged to and, in the moment before Kitty returned to her, she hurriedly

sorted through them.

The gowns looked new, unworn, and were very beautiful indeed. But if the Duke was, indeed, a recluse, a man who had lived alone for many years, why was it that there was a wardrobe full of beautiful gowns? Was there another lady here?

“You have found your gowns, Your Grace,” Kitty said as she bustled back into the room.

“Yes, I have found my gowns, Kitty; I thank you,” Isabella said, still confused. “But I have found some other gowns also, hanging alongside mine. Tell me, who do they belong to?”

“They belong to you.” Kitty smiled and looked in longingly at the gowns. “They are lovely, are they not?”

“They are very beautiful, but I do not see how they are mine.”

“His Grace had them made up for you before you came. He wanted you to have everything you needed.”

“But how could he be sure that they would fit me? The Duke and I did not even meet until yesterday in the chapel.”

“He asked your father for one of your gowns so that the seamstress

might be able to make up one that would fit you. And if there are any alterations to be made, the seamstress will return and give you a proper fitting."

"Oh, I see," Isabella said, dumbfounded.

For a moment, she thought that the effort that the Duke had gone to was extraordinarily thoughtful. However, her optimism quickly turned to dust as she thought that having everything she needed might mean that she need never leave Coldwell Hall again. Everything was so confusing.

"Which gown would you like to wear, Your Grace?" Kitty opened the second door to the wardrobe out wide.

"I think, for today at least, I shall wear this one." Isabella pointed to one of her own gowns, a neat but practical gown in a very pale green.

Isabella did not want to antagonize the Duke by choosing not to wear one of his gowns, but neither did she want to immediately go out of her way to appease him. If she was to spend a lifetime with such a man, she did not want to begin as her mother had done. She wanted to maintain something of herself, her individuality, and if it turned out to be the wrong thing to do, she would deal with the consequences as they came.

“What a lovely colour. It suits your pale skin and dark hair perfectly,” Kitty said, laying the dress out on the bed and admiring it genuinely.

Kitty had Isabella ready in no time and seemed to enjoy herself thoroughly. Isabella thought that she must have been a very good lady’s maid when she had attended the previous Duchess and was glad to see that the woman was enjoying the reprisal of her old role.

“Thank you, Kitty. How very skilled you are.” Isabella looked at her hair in the mirror.

“You do have such lovely hair, my dear.” Once again, Kitty’s absent-minded familiar tone in her address of the new Duchess was comforting, almost motherly.

“What am I to do now?” Isabella asked uncertainly.

“Well, I am to take you down to meet Mr Crawford Maguire.”

“Maguire? Oh, he is a tall man with the pale hair who opened the gates to my father’s carriage yesterday.”

“Quite so.” Kitty smiled. “The Duke thought it best that you speak with Mr Maguire so that he might be able to answer any questions that you have. Perhaps then, with some of your questions answered, you might feel a little more comfortable here.”

“I certainly hope so.”

As fearful as Isabella was of leaving the room, she was equally desperate to step out through the open door.

Kitty led her along a wide corridor, its walls adorned with some of the biggest portraits she had ever seen. The corridor was wide and gave a true sense of how large Coldwell Hall must really be. There were many doors and many rooms, and she wondered if she would ever come to know the place properly; if she would ever feel it to be her home.

She walked smartly down the immense main staircase behind Kitty and marveled at how ornate the glossy woodwork was. As she continued down the stairs, she could not help reaching out and running a finger down it, feeling the smoothness.

Arriving in the entrance hall was quite unforgettable. It was almost the size of the small ballroom back at Upperton and so grand it took her breath away. There was an ornate, life-size horse carved beautifully from wood and, sitting atop it, was a full suit of armour staged to look as if there truly was a man inside it.

There were shields everywhere and great plaques containing swords and spears as ornaments on the oak-paneled walls.

It was quite a display, and it gave her the feeling, just for a moment, of being inside a medieval castle, a place ever ready for an attack from the outside.

Isabella continued to follow Kitty for what felt like an age, turning this way and that down long corridors. Eventually, they arrived outside a partially open door, and Kitty paused.

“I do not think I shall find my way back to the room,” Isabella said, feeling suddenly nervous and not really wanting Kitty to leave her.

“Don’t worry; I shall come back for you.” And with that, Kitty laid a comforting hand on her forearm.

“Thank you,” Isabella said and took a deep breath before tapping gently on the door.

As Kitty clipped away down the corridor, the door opened, and Crawford Maguire smiled down at her.

He really was very tall, although he did not seem in any way intimidating. His gray-blue eyes looked down upon her kindly, and she felt her nerves instantly soothed.

“Do come in and take a seat,” he said as he ushered her into the room.

It was a dark wood-paneled room with many shelves, all littered with books. There was a rich oak desk, the largest she had ever seen and equally double the size of the one in her father's study.

Crawford Maguire bypassed the desk and showed her to one of two large, high-backed armchairs by a wide, low window. Isabella looked out, trying to get her bearings, and thought she must be in a room which looked out over the east side of the estate.

"Thank you," she said as she took her seat.

"I trust you are feeling better? Your head?" He looked at her with kind concern.

"Yes. The lump is very much smaller; I thank you." Isabella resisted the urge to reach up and check.

"And you have recovered from … the shock?" He spoke cautiously, but he need not say more; it was clear he was referring to the Duke's appearance.

"I did not mean to cause offence," she said quietly.

"Of course." He smiled. "It is just the way of things."

“I do not understand what I am to do next. I mean, am I to stay in my room? Am I allowed to walk freely?”

“You are not a prisoner, Your Grace.”

“Then I may leave?” she said defiantly.

“I do not know quite how to answer. You are a married woman now, and you must ask your husband such a question.”

“Then I am a prisoner,” she said sullenly.

“Elliot recognizes how difficult these early days will be for you. He is not without compassion.” Crawford smiled.

“Indeed,” she said and thought the two men must surely be long-acquainted if Crawford Maguire could speak of the Duke in terms of his first name.

“And he would not wish to force you into his company.”

“Then what am I to do?”

“All he asks is two hours a day. Two hours in which to sit and talk in the drawing room every evening.”

“I see,” she said uncertainly.

“The rest of the time is your own to spend as you see fit.”

“Am I free to walk the grounds?”

“Of course, you are.” He laughed.

“And the Hall?”

“Anywhere you wish. Nowhere is out of bounds to you, Your Grace.”

Isabella chewed thoughtfully at her bottom lip; this was not what she had expected at all. And the idea that she might explore at will gave her a childish sense of excitement, almost as if she were being allowed free range in another’s home.

But, of course, it was her home now too.

“And you may direct the servants in any way you wish. Perhaps you would like to address the cook about menus and the housekeeper about any other matters. They are good staff and very attentive. I believe you have already been approached by Kitty in respect of the position of lady’s maid?”

“Yes. Kitty has been most kind.”

“She is a very fine woman.” He smiled warmly, and Isabella wondered if she might not find much in common with Crawford Maguire along the way.

“So, I must spend just two hours with the Duke daily?” Isabella wanted it confirmed.

“Yes, in the evening. Kitty will advise you of the time each day.”

“And I may keep to my … my own room?” Her cheeks flushed hot to have to discuss such a thing with a man she barely knew.

“Yes, of course. The Duke has hopes that you will find it most comfortable.”

“Thank you.” Isabella tried to hide the sweeping relief; she did not want this man to know how she dreaded laying with the Duke.

“I am here most days, Your Grace,” he began. “And I keep a chamber here and this study. If you have any problems or questions, I can generally be found somewhere on the estate or in the Hall.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and sensed that their meeting was drawing to a close.

When she finally made her way out into the corridor, she was pleased to see Kitty waiting for her.

Kitty had been right; she did feel a little better.

Chapter 6

Kitty came for her later that day to tell her that the Duke would receive her in the drawing-room at seven o'clock.

"Will I see the Duke every evening at seven o'clock, Kitty?"

"No, I think the time will change here and there along the way."

"Am I to dress for it?"

"Just as you would normally, Your Grace." Kitty smiled. "You look so worried, and you have no need, I promise. The Duke is a good man and very fine company. Once you come to know him, I am sure you will be greatly impressed."

Isabella felt a little sad, thinking how upsetting it must be for Kitty to think back to when the Duke had been a boy, his face unspoiled.

"I am sure that I shall." Isabella was anything but.

When Kitty finally led her down to the drawing room, a room she had yet to enter, Isabella's nerve almost left her completely. Although her first day had eased the fear a little, and Crawford Maguire had done much to make her feel more secure, the memory of that dreadful,

ruined face came back to her with full force.

Her fear was suddenly so great that Isabella wanted to run away.

“The gown suits you very well, Your Grace.” Kitty seemed to sense her nerves.

“Thank you. It is a very fine gown.” Isabella looked down at herself.

She had chosen to wear one of the gowns the Duke had arranged to be made for her, deciding against any sort of open rebellion on their first evening, despite her earlier determination. Her fear was riding high enough without adding to it with her own petulance.

“Kitty, I am terribly afraid,” she whispered desperately when they arrived outside the drawing-room door.

“Have courage, my dear.” Kitty, motherly once again, took her hand. “You will come to know him, and your fear will dissolve. Please believe me, you are perfectly safe.”

Kitty opened the door before Isabella had time to turn on her heel, and she quickly ushered her in.

“The Duchess, Your Grace,” she said in a warm tone.

“Thank you, Kitty,” he replied as he rose to his feet. “Do come in, Isabella.”

His voice was very deep and smooth indeed, and Isabella wondered if it had sounded so in the cool, spartan little chapel.

“Thank you,” Isabella said meekly as she walked slowly into the room.

“Thank you, Kitty,” the Duke said, dismissing his servant most pleasingly and politely.

Isabella dwelled hard upon it, thinking it best to concentrate upon points in the Duke’s favour. He obviously liked Kitty, as did she. So, a point in the Duke’s favour.

“You walk as one on her way to the gallows, Isabella,” he spoke in a tone which was neither antagonistic nor amused.

Isabella wished she could read at least a little something from it but could not. She looked nervously towards him and realized just how poorly lit the room was.

It was early spring, and the darkness was beginning to fall outside. The curtains had been drawn, and pale lamps cast an orange glow everywhere, without truly lighting the place.

“Should I sit?” she asked meekly.

“Please do,” he said. “Perhaps you would care to take the chair I have set for you there.” He pointed to a high-backed armchair with a side table next to it, upon which stood one of the few lamps.

“Thank you.”

Isabella made her way to the chair and noted that the Duke stood sideways on to her, not turning his head, even when it would have been easier to do so.

The moment she sat down, he sat also. The glow from the lamp on the table lit her area well, but somehow made the Duke, just a few feet away, seem cast into darkness. She could only just see him.

His chair, although not far from hers, was set a little sideways on also. Even when her eyes began to adjust to the gloom, she could see only the unspoiled, handsome side of his face.

“How is your head, Isabella?” he began.

“I am recovered, Sir. I thank you.”

“Elliot,” he said in a somewhat stiff tone.

“Elliot,” she parroted.

“I am sorry that you were not better prepared for yesterday’s ordeal.”

“I … I …” Isabella hardly knew how to answer.

She could not agree and confirm that it had, indeed, been an ordeal.

“You are embarrassed.”

“I do not know what to say.”

“I have lived with my own dreadful appearance for many years, Isabella. You shall not offend me by referring to it.”

“I see.”

“We are married, after all.”

“We are.”

“I realize that this is very difficult for you. You must miss your home terribly.”

“No.” She spoke so vehemently she could hardly believe it.

“You do not miss your family?”

“No, I do not.”

“You seem angry with them.”

“I am.”

“Because you are here now with me, and you blame them for it?”

“I do not know how to answer you truthfully without giving offence.”

“I am not trying to trick you. You may answer truthfully.”

Isabella stared over at him through the gloom for a moment. She could make out his handsome, strong profile well now that she had acclimatized to the darkness, although she could not see his green eyes, or at least the one on the left side of his face, the only one facing her.

Instead, it looked dark, almost black, giving him an ever more brooding appearance.

“You cannot think I was pleased to be forced to marry a man I did not know; a man I had never met before my wedding day.” If he were going to give her the opportunity to speak freely, she would take it

lest she never have another chance.

“A man so disfigured that the children of the county tell stories about him to thrill and frighten each other,” he said in a flat tone.

“You are angry, are you not, that I fainted away?”

“Not angry, no.”

“You must surely be displeased in some way.”

“I am aware of the effect my appearance has on a person who is encountering it for the first time.”

“I apologize for fainting, Elliot.” It felt strange to address him so. “But you must surely understand that I was already in a nervous state before I had even come into your estate.”

“I am sure.”

“I know nothing of you. You might be cruel or bad tempered for all I can say. All I have to compare you to is, as you say, the gossip and stories. I do not mean to suggest that they are true, but I should like you to see it from my viewpoint if you will.”

“A young woman brought to a strange place by her father to marry a

man she might be wise to fear?"

"Exactly so," she said and was relieved that when he said she must speak freely, he seemed to have meant it. "And so, you must not assume it was your appearance alone which led me to such fear because it was not."

"But it must have had some effect."

"You have asked me to speak plainly and I shall," she began after taking a deep breath. "I had not known what to expect, and I was surprised by your scars. When you turned, I … I …"

"You had expected me to be as I am on this side." He raised a hand to the unspoiled side of his face.

"Yes."

"You have been honest indeed."

"You asked me to be so, Sir."

"Did your father give you no say?"

"None. But that is not out of the common way. My father does not give say to any person who does not hold a higher rank. It has always

been so, and I am well used to it."

"I am sorry."

"To find that he had abandoned me here without waiting to enquire after my health came as no surprise to me."

"I cannot imagine having so careless a father." His voice was so smooth that Isabella closed her eyes. It was another point in the Duke's favour. "But I suspected as much. I suspected that your father was a careless man when he did not think it necessary for us to meet beforehand."

"But you still went ahead." Isabella could hear the accusation in her own voice.

"Yes." He paused for a long time. "I have spent a good many years in isolation, and I acted out of my own selfishness. It is difficult to explain what it is like to have lived as I have. I do not tell you so in order to extract pity, for I would not wish for it. I tell you only in explanation."

"I see." And Isabella believed him.

"It would seem we have talked of the deeper issues very early. Perhaps that is simply the nature of a marriage made just as ours

was."

"There is no allowance for coming slowly to know a person, I daresay."

"But perhaps you could manage just two hours in every day?"

"Of course." Isabella could not stop her mind racing ahead.

Would there come a time when two hours of conversation a day was not enough for Elliot? Would he want more from her? Would he want something she could not give?

"Have you seen anything of the estate today?"

"Only a little of the Hall," she said and was grateful for the sudden change in direction. "I am greatly impressed by the entrance hall. It is so very grand and so large."

"And the knight in shining armour? Do you like him?"

"The steed is carved most beautifully. It is so intricate that I returned to it twice more to make a study. And the armour is most impressive. Is it genuine?"

"I have never been able to get to the bottom of that question." He

laughed suddenly, and Isabella was surprised by it. She was surprised that a man so disfigured would ever find anything to laugh at again. “It has been here for many generations. Or, at least, that is what my father told me. And he always said that it had been worn by a brave knight in battle. He would tell such wonderful stories of his escapades.”

“You laugh, Elliot. Did you not believe your father?”

“He teased me a good deal and was a man who liked to weave fairy tales for the delight of his children. In such matters, I never knew when to believe him.” He spoke so fondly that Isabella felt affected by it.

What must it be like to have a father who would enjoy teasing his children playfully and telling them great tales? Instead of a father who ignored and dismissed, paying attention only to berate and bully.

“Then you have been blessed,” Isabella spoke without thinking.

How could she have described such a man as blessed? Oh, how she wished she could have taken it back.

“That is true, Isabella. My father was a very fine man.”

“You must miss him.”

“I do.” He said quietly. “I miss them all.”

Isabella could sense that he spoke the last vaguely as if it had been a thought he had not intended to voice. She knew she could not question him further.

However, she did wonder about his family. Had he siblings? She had never heard of it before. And his mother, she knew, had passed away eighteen years before. That much she had learned from Kitty.

When the time was right, she would ask Kitty more.

“Tell me, do you have everything you need?” he said in a much brighter voice as if he wished to wash away the last sombre moments.

“Yes. I thank you.” She thought of her wardrobe. “And I thank you for the gowns; they are beautiful. It was most thoughtful of you.”

“If there are any which do not fit, they will be altered for you as you wish. And if you require any others, you have only to ask.”

“How kind.”

“I can see that the gown you have chosen this evening fits you very well.” His voice lowered. “Very well.”

For a moment, Isabella felt a little panic stricken. It was nice to be complimented in such a way but, at the same time, she did not want Elliot Covington to be attracted to her; she could not bear it.

“Thank you,” she said in a tiny voice.

“Well, perhaps we have had conversation enough for this evening,” he said and seemed to have come to a very sudden decision.

Isabella thought that they could not have been in the drawing room together for anything close to the two hours she had been expecting and wondered why he suddenly wanted to put an end to it.

“As you wish,” she said and hoped she sounded neutral.

She did not want to sound as if she was keen to escape his company. In truth, she was not altogether keen to run away. The Duke had been pleasant enough and their conversation more open than she had expected if a little awkward at times.

He turned a little from her and looked towards the empty fire grate. Isabella rose uncertainly to her feet.

“Should I leave?” she said quietly.

“Yes, perhaps that would be for the best this evening.” She thought he sounded sad.

“Then I shall bid you goodnight, Elliot.”

“Goodnight, Isabella.”

Chapter 7

“My Dearest Esme,

How relieved I am to be able to write you this letter. In the days before my departure from Upperton, I wondered if I would ever be able to correspond with you again.

Let me first tell you that I am quite safe. Yes, I am now married to the Duke of Coldwell, and I am not content in that. But I am safe.

You will have discerned that I did not make my escape to Ireland. Anthony had found the sailing timetable and watched me so closely that he caught me trying to leave in the middle of the night. I shall not write here what my father did to punish me. It need not be said.

But he would not allow me to see or write to you after that time, judging that it was you who had helped me to plan the thing.

My wedding day was quite the most uncomfortable. When I set eyes upon the Duke’s face, I am sorry to say that my courage and good manners departed, and I fainted away like a frightened child.

In looks, the Duke is, indeed, a monster. Although I am bound to say that he is not in manners or personality. He is a man of some poise and

thoughtfulness; at least, that is what I know of him thus far.

I cannot say I yet know him well, nor have I looked upon his face since the day of our wedding. I have only to meet with him every evening for two hours. During that time, we talk in a very gloomy lamplight. The time of our meeting is adjusted daily, and I have come to realize that this is to accommodate for the ever lightening days as spring progresses.

Furthermore, the Duke arranges things so that I might only look upon the side of his face which is not disfigured. The perfect left side of his face. And it is perfect, Esme. What a handsome man he might be but for the scars.

And they are quite dreadful, my dear, so ruinous.

I must admit myself relieved to discover that I have a good many freedoms here at Coldwell Hall. I am allowed to spend my days as I see fit and have even ridden around the estate on horseback, which I greatly enjoyed.

The Hall is more like a castle, although not fully such. I mean that there are many architectural features which remind one of a fairy tale place or a medieval stronghold. It is a fine and impressive building, and the estate of Coldwell could hold Upperton within its walls almost ten times over.

And it is not the dilapidated place that we two always imagined it to be in the telling of our stories. At least not all of it, but I shall return to that point later.

The Hall and grounds are very well cared for, and there are so many servants here that I cannot think I have yet met but half of them.

They are all pleasant and accommodating, and I have a most motherly, kindly lady's maid. Her name is Kitty, and she is a little advanced in years for the task, but I like her very much, and she is exceptional in all ways.

There, I have given you the bare bones of the thing. Enough, I hope, that you are not fearing I have been locked away in a dungeon by an evil monster.

I have met with my husband every evening of the week I have now been here and find that I am growing accustomed to our meetings. I do not dread them as I did at first and can only hope that we shall be able to manage to live in this way contentedly.

It certainly does not seem that he would wish for my presence any longer than the two hours and would, I am sure, actively avoid me at all other times.

I only say so because of something which happened yesterday. Something so strange that I can hardly wait to write it all down.

I had been intent upon a walk through the woodlands on the estate. They are vast and beautiful, and they form the greater extent of the vista from

the windows of my own chamber.

I had taken a very central path into the woods, for there are many, and was so enthralled by the beauty and the fresh air. It was so quiet, so peaceful, with nothing but the birdsong to accompany my silent footsteps.

And so, when a figure suddenly appeared in front of me as I took a sharp turn in my path, I almost screamed. It was none other than my husband, and it appeared that he was as surprised by our meeting as was I.

He stood stock still for a moment, and we were face to face. I had not seen his face in its entirety since the day of our wedding, and I am afraid to say that the horror of it struck me afresh. However, I am pleased to report that I maintained a level countenance and most certainly did not faint this time.

As soon as the Duke came to his senses, he turned his head sharply away, leaving only his unmarked skin on view. And, at that moment, I felt most dreadfully sorry for him.

He has asked me from the first not to pity him in any way, and I have tried not to do so. But at that moment, I could not help it. I was so struck by the idea that it must be a terrible thing not to walk freely about for fear of coming face to face with another. I thought how very limiting it must be, and I knew precisely how I would feel if it were my life and not his.

And I felt so sad and desolate that I could not speak. We simply stood there

in the most terrible silence, and I could not think what I should do.

I continued to look at him, and I could see such a look of pain in his countenance, in the shining beauty of the one green eye I could see, that I wanted to cry. I felt I had caused it somehow, you see. Finally, at the moment when my mouth had opened as if ready to speak, the Duke turned entirely and continued on his way, not having spoken a single word to me. I turned cautiously to watch his departing back and saw that he did not look back once in my direction.

He was striding quickly, that much I could discern, and I felt almost that he had wished to be away from me even more than I might have wished to be away from him. I felt so low that I wanted to call out after him, to give chase and tell him that I would not expect him to be a prisoner within his own four walls, never now coming out into his own beautiful grounds for fear of happening upon his wife by daylight.

But of course, I did not. I could not do so for I knew that I had been truly shocked, once again, to see the angry red and silver skin.

In the end, there was nothing for it but for me to continue along my path. I no longer felt at peace, and the birdsong did not sound as sweet to me as it had just moments before.

Although not a word passed between us, I felt as if a good deal of meaning truly had. I still cannot say what that meaning is and further still cannot

explain why it is that it has affected me so and made me feel so melancholy.

I continued to walk, determined to shake off the feeling if I could. The woods are so vast, and I decided to walk into them until I was tired, anything to replace the feeling of sadness.

After more than twenty minutes, the woodlands suddenly opened up into a little clearing. It was quite surprising to come upon the clearing in such a way. And not only that, but there was a building there, an aged stone building.

I realized immediately that it was a building that I can see the very top of from the window of my chamber, a building which had greatly intrigued me for many days prior.

It was a curious shape and in such a curious place. It was a rounded tower, but not a slim one. Its circumference was wide and the tower itself very tall, its castellated uppermost reaches breaking out through the highest branches of the trees above.

I studied the stone and realized that it was much darker and older than that of Coldwell Hall itself. I deduced that the broader tower had been in position much longer than the hall. It did feel very medieval, and I wondered if it served a larger building or castle that might have been there before on the site.

I must admit, my musings greatly intrigued me and diverted me from my sadness. I began to imagine knights in armour and horses and men with bows and arrows standing high upon the battlements of the tower.

I wandered here and there, trying to find footings of an older building, long fallen to the ground, but I could find none.

In the end, I turned my attention back to the tower itself. There was a wide, heavy wooden door to it, and I approached in hopes of gaining entry. The tower was largely covered in a thick growth of ivy which snaked its way around the walls and seemed to have climbed into some of the narrow slits which served as windows however many hundred years ago. I looked up and imagined a bowman peering out before carefully aiming an arrow at the heart of an approaching intruder.

It is true to say that my imagination still runs wild, my dear Esme, just as it did when we were children. But it is such a place, the estate of Coldwell Hall. Seeming to be so cut off from the world, its thick foliage and spiky hawthorns every bit as defensive as a moat and bailey. And yet, once inside, it is easy to find oneself quite enchanted.

And that is it, Esme. That is exactly how I felt looking up at the tower in the middle of the woods. Enchanted.

As I approached the great wooden door, I could see that it was in a poor

state of repair. It was old, certainly, and eaten away to some degree also. I pulled it gently towards me and made my way cautiously inside.

It was surprisingly light inside the tower, given that the windows were so very narrow. But there were many of them, you see, and the tower itself was so wide that it was a good deal brighter than I would have imagined.

I looked up, thinking that I would easily be able to see right to the top. However, there was a stone ceiling above me, a platform, and stairs of a spiral nature leading up from the other side of the room.

A breeze blew the door a little, and it began to close, not altogether, just an inch or so. I turned to look at it and could see that it was blackened. I then looked a little more closely around and could see that the stone walls were not simply dark, but that they were blackened also.

There was much debris on the floor, although it was impossible to tell exactly what it was. I picked my way around it and headed for the spiral staircase. As I put my foot on the bottom step and looked upwards, I could see that the walls there were greatly blackened too.

In fact, it was very black at the bottom but seemed to lighten as it progressed. Nothing more than the purest curiosity led me to take a few more steps, although I wish now that I had not.

I could see that I was within reach of the first platform and decided to

make my way to it. I continued up the steps and walked cautiously into the round-walled room.

Instantly, I could see that the place had been set up well, although everything within was old and somewhat blackened. It looked to me as if it had been played in by children more than anything. It was not set as a living abode as such, but it had many little comforts in it.

There was an old armchair on the far side of the room, much eaten by moths and layered with dust. There was a small wooden table, very much in the same state of repair as the chair, and it lay on its side in the middle of the room.

As I walked around, I began to realize that this tower must surely, at some point in its history, have been on fire. The very idea made me shudder, and I instantly thought of my husband's scarring. That he has been burned is very clear to me. I could not help thinking that he must have been burned in this place, in this tower in which I now stood.

I wanted to leave; I desperately wanted to leave, but I could not. Something urged me further on into the room, to make my way across and look more closely. It was then that I saw it and almost gasped. There, just at the foot of the ruined armchair lay a doll. Its clothing was ruined and tattered, as was its hair, but its porcelain face was curiously without a crack, dirty but otherwise perfect, staring up at me blindly through the brightest hand-painted blue eyes.

The whole scene gave me the most awful sense of fear and sadness, and I was struck by an urge to suddenly run away. I hastened back to the mouth of the spiral staircase and, in my haste, almost pitched forward and fell. I steadied myself but was greatly shaken.

Managing to gather my nerve, I walked slowly and carefully down the steps and back into the ground room.

I looked again at the walls and felt sure that the fire, whenever it had taken place, must surely have started there. The walls were so black and the debris, as I have already said, unrecognizable. Perhaps the flames could not make their way so easily up the spiral staircase, finding nothing but cold stone; stone that the fire could not feed upon.

When I left the tower and pushed the door closed, I felt very relieved. I wanted to escape the dark feelings and race out through the woodland.

I hurried and put much distance between myself and the tower in a few short minutes and, when I finally regained the morning room and its safety, I was truly relieved at last.

It is only now as I write that I link my meeting with the Duke on that path and the smoke-blackened tower. Surely, Esme, he must have come from that place? Or at least walked past it on his way back towards the Hall.

Was that why I had seen such a look of sadness on his face? Could it have been a visit to the tower which had given him such an air of desolation that I could almost feel it? After all, he has already told me himself that he has lived long enough with his injuries that he is not so affected anymore by the repulsion of others.

Really, I cannot get to the bottom of it at all, and all that there is left for me to do is to await this evening's customary meeting in the drawing-room.

I cannot lie; I am made very nervous by the prospect. I feel now as if I have intruded in some way, happened upon something I do not quite understand. And, despite the Duke telling me that I am free to move about where I wish, I cannot escape the feeling that I have made an error in visiting the tower.

I shall end now and tell you in my next letter how it all progresses. It is my sincerest wish that you are well and happy and that you shall find time to return my little correspondence. I miss you more than I can tell.

With much love,

Isabella."

Chapter 8

In the end, Isabella had not seen Elliot in the drawing room that evening. Kitty sombrely brought her the news that His Grace was a little unwell and had thought to cancel their meeting that evening lest he part with some germ or other that would bring her low.

“Oh dear,” Isabella said, not believing the explanation for a moment. “I do hope he is soon recovered.”

“I’m sure he shall be.” And for all world, Kitty looked a little uncomfortable.

At that moment, Isabella was certain that the Duke was not ill and, what was more, she suspected that Kitty knew it very well. She fought hard against a desire to ask, to see if she could shed some light on the thing.

Of course, the idea that the Duke might well be suffering some sort of melancholy could not be avoided entirely. She drew to mind the look on his face and the blackened walls of the old tower. More than anything, she wanted to ask Kitty about the tower. And yet things were still so new, she had been there but a week, and she knew she could not be so bold as to request such information.

Also, Isabella could not escape the feeling that she had, in some way, added to his misery. Perhaps he regretted allowing her the free run of the place. He might even have assumed that she would not go so far as to enter the tower, or maybe he had not even thought of it. If only she were not so in the dark about it all; if only she had at least enough information to avoid causing any sort of offence or upset in the future.

After all, she still had not settled entirely, despite her determinedly cheerful tone in her letter to Esme, and she did not want to add to that feeling by blundering into making a mistake.

“Is the Duke not to take any dinner at all?” she said, wondering if he might truly be unwell.

“I think it likely that he will take a little something in his room later, Your Grace.”

“Then I am to amuse myself,” Isabella said with a smile. “Perhaps I will take my own meal in the dining room tonight instead of sitting here in this room. Do you think that that would be possible, Kitty?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Kitty brightened. “I would be very pleased to think that you were growing accustomed to the place. I shall speak to the cook and the housekeeper and see that your place is set at the table.”

“Would it be too much to ask to have it set in the breakfast room instead?” Isabella said suddenly. “I ask only because the dining room is so very large, and I should feel rather lonely in it.”

“I’m sure that it would be perfectly alright.” Kitty made her farewells so that she might put Isabella’s plans for dinner into motion.

When the light began to fade and early evening was upon them, Isabella made her way down to the breakfast room. As promised, it was set nicely for her, a place just for one.

Already, a young footman was waiting patiently in the room, ready to pull the bell at the side of the fireplace to let the servants below know that their mistress was ready to eat.

“Thank you kindly,” Isabella said to the young man she was not sure she had seen before.

“You’re welcome, Your Grace,” he said politely.

“Tell me, what is your name?” she said, feeling suddenly lonely.

Even though the breakfast room was welcoming and a place she had sat for the last three mornings to take her early morning meal, it seemed somehow vast by candle and lamplight. She felt isolated; alone.

“Thomas, Your Grace,” he said and bowed.

“And have you worked here at the hall for a long time, Thomas?”

“I have worked here for two years, Your Grace.” He was a young man of about her age with pale hair and eyes.

“And how do you find it?”

“I am very pleased to be here, Your Grace.”

“I am pleased to hear that.”

Isabella was faltering, not knowing what else to say to him. She could tell that the young man did not want to be engaged in conversation, and that he felt dreadfully self-conscious to be spoken to in such friendly tones by his new mistress. Perhaps he would have preferred the customary distance that ordinarily existed between family and servants.

In the end, Isabella fell silent and studied the table top and its solitary place setting. The sense of isolation was greater than any she had felt since she had arrived at Coldwell Hall, and she fully determined to take her dinner in her own rooms from that point onward. She did not want to be reminded of her solitary life.

And yet, only days before, she had been relieved to discover that her new husband would require no more than two hours of her company every day. She had felt grateful not to have to be in his presence any longer than that.

But as her meal was served to her, and she ate in silence, Isabella would have been pleased by the prospect of spending two hours with Elliot. She would have gratefully sat in the gloom of the drawing room and looked at the indistinct features of his perfect profile. She would have welcomed his quiet questions and sudden changes in conversational direction. Anything to relieve the isolation of that moment.

Isabella ate quickly, wanting the meal to be done with as soon as possible so that she might retreat once more to her own chamber. Curiously, the silence in her room seemed perfectly normal, almost soothing. Perhaps silence at dinner was rather more deafening in its own way.

With her meal eaten and a vague, dull pain in her stomach that she attributed to the speed of her consumption of it, she thanked the footman and asked that he pass her compliments to the cook for a wonderful meal.

The footman bowed deeply before she turned to make her way out of

the breakfast room with the hopes that it would feel very different when she returned to it in the morning.

As Isabella reached the bottom of the wide staircase, she stared over at the wooden horse and its metal companion. A knight in shining armour was how Elliot had described it. As if the suit of armour contained the man of his father's stories.

With a sigh, she embarked upon the stairs, pausing sharply when she heard the strains of a violin somewhere in the distance.

She stopped stock still with one foot on the bottom step and strained to hear. Sure enough, she could hear a violin being played somewhere on the ground floor and wondered who the musician might be.

Isabella wondered if it might be one of the servants, somebody with a musical inclination. Or perhaps it was Crawford Maguire.

She turned and made her way through the great entrance hall, passing the wooden horse and his valiant rider as she determined to find the source of the playing.

Isabella had not happened across Crawford Maguire since their meeting on her first morning at Coldwell, and she thought she might like to spend a few moments in his company to stave off the curious sense of loneliness.

Isabella followed the music, turning this way and that down corridors until it grew louder; nearer. Finally, she arrived at a partially open door to a room that she already knew was the library. She had spent a good deal of time in there on her exploration and had selected several books from the shelves to adorn her chamber.

She stood for a moment outside the door listening properly to the violin music. It was a tune that she had not heard before, a haunting melody that stirred her. She felt emotional, sad, and there was a little thickening at her throat which made it hard to swallow.

Isabella knew, of course, that she would have to compose herself before she entered the library. In truth, she did not know if she ought to enter it at all. Perhaps she would do better to find out who was in there before she made so bold a move.

As the melody continued, Isabella crept closer to the door, attempting to peek in through the gap. There was a fire lit in the grate, and its flames danced in the near darkness. There was not a lamplight anywhere, not even the weak light of a candle's flame. She squinted and tried to see into the darkness trying to discern whatever she could by the flame of the fire.

When she saw that it was the Duke who sat alone in the library playing the violin, she found herself suddenly rooted to the spot. She

did not want to intrude upon his privacy, especially when he had made it very clear that he had not wanted the two of them to meet that evening.

However, Isabella could not take her eyes from him. As he played, she felt certain that his eyes were closed, not paying any attention at all to the violin he played so very well.

And, as he sat unguarded, she could make out both sides of his face. And it was true to say that the diminished lighting did much to improve the appearance of the disfigurement.

Isabella could not have described what she felt as she watched him. A part of her dwelled upon the fact that he had claimed himself unwell, and she knew now that he had only said so in order that he would not spend any time with her that evening.

Quite why she felt a little upset by that, she could not say.

After all, she had known him but a matter of days, and it was quite natural for a person, she knew from experience, to want a little time to themselves here and there along the way. But did he not already have enough time to himself? Did the Duke not already spend much of his day in solitude?

Isabella thought that *that* was, perhaps, their largest area of common

ground. They both lived in that beautiful, sprawling estate, an enchanted place with secrets and trees and knights in shining armour. And they both lived alone, to all intents and purposes. They wandered by day in their own private worlds, gently tiptoeing from place to place so that they might avoid one another.

In order that they might make themselves and each other very lonely people indeed.

Isabella knew that she must go, that she must move and not spy on him a moment longer. Something had affected him greatly that day, whether it was related to her or not, and he had a right to manage his feelings in his own way.

And yet still she could not go; she could not leave before the end. The piece he was playing was so beautiful, so emotional and heartfelt, that she had to hear it to the end.

Still standing so close to the partially open door, Isabella did just as her husband and closed her eyes. The moment she did so, she felt herself transported to the woods and the tower and the feeling of great sadness. And despite the feeling of sadness, she could not deny it. She could not turn away or block her ears; she did not want to. It was almost as if it was a feeling which must be felt, something that would not be denied.

As the strains of the violin began to die away, growing ever quieter, she knew that Elliot must be coming to the end of the piece. Her time to stand there as an unseen watcher, an interloper upon the privacy of another, was coming to an end, and she knew she must leave.

As she opened her eyes and looked at him to watch him play those last few notes, Isabella was taken aback to find that the Duke's eyes were already open and that he looked at her intently.

Seeing that she had finally opened her own eyes did not make him stop playing, nor did it make him take his eyes off her. He simply continued on to the end, finishing his piece as he had clearly intended to.

Isabella wanted to turn and run; she felt so ashamed of her behaviour. But she knew that she could not. She must make her apology and make it most genuinely.

"I am sorry," she said the moment he had finished playing and lowered the violin onto his lap. "I should not have …"

"You need not stand in the doorway, Isabella," he said, his deep voice quiet and yet resonant.

Isabella continued to stand where she was, unsure if he was dismissing her from his sight or inviting her into the room. She looked at him

helplessly.

“Isabella, come in.”

Chapter 9

Isabella made her way cautiously into the room. For one thing, she thought she might be in trouble for seeking him out when he had clearly not wanted company. For another, it was almost dark in the room, and she was struggling to see a clear path by the light of the fire.

“Perhaps you could take a seat here?”he said, and she could just make him out moving one of the armchairs in the darkness.

Although she knew the library well, Isabella was not confident negotiating her way in the darkness. But, as she reached Elliot, he reached out and took her arm to guide her. For a moment, Isabella thought she would flinch. As soon as his hand was on the soft skin of her forearm, the image of his face as he turned to her in the chapel on their wedding day seemed to flood her brain.

However, Elliot quickly released her once she was safely sitting down, and the memory soon fled.

“I am not fond of bright light, as I am sure you have already perceived,” he said in his quiet but resonant tones.

“It is of little matter; I am seated now. And I intruded upon you this

evening, not the other way around."

"There is no intrusion, Isabella," he said as he moved his chair a little.

Isabella quickly realized that he was intent on turning away from her, just as he did every evening in the drawing room.

Even in the darkness, he would sooner hide away. And was it any wonder? After all, had she not almost flinched at nothing more than a memory of his face?

"You play the violin beautifully." She wanted to change the conversation.

Isabella did not want to be drawn to making some insult by allowing her mind to dwell upon the subject of light and darkness. It could only end with talk regarding his disfigurement, which would be most uncomfortable, or silence, which would be worse.

"Thank you."

"I have not heard that piece before. What was it?"

"It is nothing," he said and gave a light laugh.

His laugh was warm and almost tuneful. It made him seem much

younger than a man approaching his fortieth year.

“Nothing? I do not understand,” Isabella said quizzically.

“It is not a piece you will have heard before because it has only ever been played within these walls. It is just a little melody I made up to amuse myself.”

“A little melody?” Isabella said and was amazed. “You are too modest to describe it as such. You composed the piece, Elliot?”

“Yes. Although *composed* sounds rather grand.”

“It is nothing of the sort.” Isabella forgot the discomfort of the preceding moments. “That was a truly beautiful piece of music. And no simple thing either. That was a piece of genuine complexity.”

“You are very kind, Isabella.”

“And I am honest.” She laughed. “I cannot think I have heard the violin played so well, nor a piece of music I liked better.”

“I do not play as often as I used to.”

“It does not show itself.” She meant every word. Isabella knew she had been transported by Elliot’s playing and by the magical, haunting

melody. “Have you played since childhood? I have never truly mastered an instrument.”

“I did not begin to learn until I was perhaps eight and twenty years,” he said quietly.

“Eight and twenty? But you have only played these last ten years?”

“Yes.”

“I would have assumed you were a lifelong musician.”

“You pay me a great compliment.”

“To think you did not take lessons until so much later on.” Isabella was astonished.

“I did not take lessons,” Elliot said simply.

“You did not? But how did you learn?”

“I just kept trying until I had it worked out.”

“You taught yourself how to play the violin?”

“Yes.”

“But that must have been so difficult. And it must have taken so long.”

“I had a good deal of time to fill and had spent too much of it wallowing in self-pity. I found it a most healing, restful thing, and it gave me a sense of purpose for the years it took to master it.”

Isabella was silent for a moment as she thought how he must have spent day after day practicing from morning until night.

No doubt it had been something for Elliot to focus on in what she knew must have been so many years alone. And even now he was still alone, to a large extent, at any rate.

“Do you play any other instruments?”

“The piano, but I learned to play as a child. I must admit I was not particularly fond of the amusement. I doubt many children are.”

“I must agree,” Isabella said with a laugh as she remembered her own exasperating piano lessons.

“You play the piano?”

“Yes. Not very well, it must be said, but I do play. I learned as a child and somewhat against my will also.”

“Mothers seem always to want their children to play the piano.” Elliot laughed.

“Your mother liked to hear you play?”

“Yes. However awful, she always enjoyed it. I have memories of playing pieces far too difficult for one of my limited experience, and yet my mother always rose to her feet and applauded loudly as if she were in a hall listening to a professional.” She could hear the warmth in his voice at the memory.

Isabella felt suddenly a little sad. Her mother had, of course, insisted that she played the piano and saw to it that she was trained by a very fine teacher over a number of years. However, it had been because proficiency in a musical instrument was expected of fine young ladies and nothing more. It had not been for the love of music and certainly had not been for Isabella’s benefit specifically. It was an accomplishment and nothing more.

And as for acting as an appreciative audience, no matter the quality of the young Isabella’s performance, that had not happened. The Countess had only ever winced her way through any piece she heard her young daughter play, likely wondering how her lack of proficiency would affect her marriage prospects in later life. As far as she could remember, her father had never heard her play. The Earl of Upperton

seemed never to spend any time with them in the drawing room as a family.

When they had guests, any showing off from her father was linked exclusively to her brother, Anthony.

“How wonderfully attentive,” Isabella said with the feeling that she had missed out a good deal.

“And then there was the question of my singing,” Elliot said with another laugh.

“Oh, you can sing too?” Isabella said brightly.

“Good Lord, no.” He laughed all the harder. “But my mother would hear none of it. As far as she was concerned, I was a true proficient in the art.”

“It must have given you great confidence.”

“Given my level of skill, perhaps a little too much confidence.”

It was the first time Isabella had seen a glimpse of the real Duke, albeit through the darkness. He was a man of modesty and wit who seemed most comfortable when he was being amusing.

“But what of you, Isabella? Do you still play the pianoforte?”

“Not for many years. My mother did not take much interest in my performances. She simply thought I ought to know how to play.”

“And did you not play for your family? I mean, in the evenings and what-have-you?”

“No, I am afraid not,” Isabella said with a sigh. “My father rarely sat with us in the evenings, and my mother thought my practice ought to be restricted to my lessons or the solitude of private practice in the music room.” She laughed also, but it was a less jolly sound.

“I am sure that you play very well indeed.”

“I could not say,” she said awkwardly. “My younger brother took to the music room to learn the violin, and it became a place for him to enjoy.”

“You could not enjoy the music room together?”

“My brother is some years younger and much used to getting his own way in things.”

“That seems awfully hard.” Elliot’s voice held some concern for her, and Isabella was not sure how she felt about it. She did not want to be

pitied.

“I grew accustomed to the way of things.”

“Your mother favored your brother?”

“My father did, and so, by default, my mother did. She did not have much choice although I never perceived any effort on her part to try.”

“Your father spent his own efforts on his heir, I presume.”

“Well, I daresay it is the way of all fathers, is it not?”

“No,” Elliot said gently. “My own dear father was very fond of Eleanor.”

“Your sister?” Isabella asked.

A chasm of silence opened up between them and, when Elliot did not reply for some minutes, Isabella wished she had not spoken. Involuntarily, she thought of the doll in the tower, its porcelain face blackened with smoke.

“He was a fair father to us both,” he said finally.

“That is a very fine thing.” Isabella hoped that it would seal that

particular conversation.

More than anything, Isabella had wanted to know Elliot's history; the history of Coldwell Hall and the Covington family. But she felt suddenly afraid of pursuing it. She felt sure that Elliot had not meant to venture so far along that conversational path and was even then thinking of some other route.

"Did you never enjoy the piano?" he asked, and she was pleased he had turned the conversation back onto less dangerous ground.

"In truth, I did," she said with a forced brightness. "I had always wanted to play nicely, and I was if I am remembering true, quietly proud of my little achievements. But as I said, I was hardly encouraged. Or, at least, not encouraged for the right reasons or in the right direction." She was quiet for a moment. "But if I think about it, I wish that I had, perhaps, persevered with it. It is a nice amusement, and it might well have spurred me on to play other instruments. Who is to know now?" She laughed dismissively but realized that she had spoken the truth.

It would be very easy for her to blame her mother and father for so much that seemed to have been missing from her life. Whilst she would not choose to spend her time in such negative musings, still, she could not shake the feeling.

In the time since she had been at Coldwell Hall, Isabella had not mourned the loss of family contact. Whilst her father was the tyrant, she did not wonder about her mother either. The woman had looked on and done nothing for Isabella's entire life. Isabella knew that there were few options for rebellion for women like her mother in such a marriage as hers, but there had been no secret comfort either.

Isabella had always hoped for a quiet camaraderie between mother and daughter. She had always wanted to be embraced and to be quietly assured that her mother truly loved her, even if there was nothing she could do to stand up to the Earl.

But that had never come.

"Perhaps you might care for the violin one day?" He broke through her murky thoughts.

"I cannot imagine I would be so good a player as you, Elliot."

"Do you need to be good at it? Or at the piano for that matter?" he said, and she was taken aback. "What I mean is that perhaps enjoyment is the thing, rather than technical attainment. Perhaps that is what music should mean to us."

"Perhaps it should." Isabella smiled into the darkness.

There was something in what Elliot said which seemed to resonate with her. What did the appearance matter if the love of the pastime was there in one's heart?

"Unless you intend to play to large audiences, of course." And there it was again; a very real humor.

"One step at a time, perhaps." Isabella was pleased to hear Elliot laugh.

"And you have other amusements too? I believe you like to walk in nature." Elliot seemed to be more comfortable with her.

"I do. And I have greatly enjoyed walking the grounds here. You really do have a beautiful estate."

"It is yours to wander freely."

"Thank you," she said and was reminded of the moment the two of them had come face to face earlier that day.

It had been that very meeting, sudden and unplanned, that had seen Elliot cancelling their evening meeting. Or at least that was what she had assumed.

"The woodland is so extensive," Isabella went on. "It is so full of

interest and so thick. It feels quite magical to be inside it."

"It has been so for many years. The woodland is very old and well established. The perimeter is not quite so well established."

"Leylandii are not easy to walk through," she said in total want of anything else to say as she thought of the thick natural barrier to the outside world.

"But they grow tall and thick very quickly," he spoke quietly again.

"Which means they make very fine fencing. Good barriers." Isabella felt back on a path to the unknown.

"They were not always here. I had them planted myself eighteen years ago."

"They are very well kept."

"Yes." His voice trailed away to such an extent that she could hardly hear him.

In the darkness, his demeanour seemed to have changed again, and Isabella could not read it at all. Perhaps he was no keener on the conversational path than she.

“The grounds are very well kept too. The gardens are so neat, and the rose bushes look set to provide many blooms when the weather warms.”

“Thank you. I have several gardeners and under-gardeners.”

“You must enjoy the estate greatly yourself.”

“It is a great comfort to be so fortunate in my surroundings. The grounds are ever changing and a source of much interest to me.”

More than anything, Isabella wanted to ask him about the tower. She knew he would not bring it up himself.

“You did not seem pleased to see me today, Elliot,” she began nervously.

“Forgive me.”

“Please, there is no need. I was simply concerned that I had walked into the woods unwanted. What I am trying to say is that I should not like to spoil any enjoyment or contentment of your own, Elliot, with my presence. I am happy to walk only where directed.”

“I would not banish you from any part of Coldwell; it is your home now,” he said in a low voice. “And my surprise at seeing you was

unwarranted. I had known that you might well be outside, but had not truly thought you to be in the woodland. Still, it is of little matter."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Daylight is not my friend, Isabella. I am sure you can understand why. But I shall be more careful in my dress in future."

Isabella felt a dull ache in her chest; he meant to cover his face in future.

"No, you must not change your way of things. It is for me to adapt to a new life, Elliot, not you."

"Well, I daresay it is late." Elliot shifted in his seat, and Isabella knew she had caused him embarrassment. "Will you manage, or shall I light a candle for you?"

"I can see to the door." Isabella rose awkwardly to her feet. "Well, goodnight, Elliot."

"Goodnight, Isabella."

Chapter 10

As Isabella walked into the church she had attended her entire life, she was taken aback by just how many people openly stared at her. She realized immediately that none of them had expected to see her there. None of them had ever expected to see her again.

“Ignore them, Your Grace,” Kitty whispered quietly into her ear. “You must take your place down at the front of the church, the most forward pew.”

“Kitty, I do not want to go to the front of the church.”

“You are the Duchess of Coldwell, and there is allotted seating for the Duke and his family. You have every right to take it, Your Grace.” Kitty quickly and secretly squeezed her hand as the last of the staring congregation returned their attention to the front of the church.

“If I walk, they will simply stare at me afresh.”

“If they wish to stare at you, Your Grace, they will take any opportunity no matter where you stand,” Kitty said in hushed tones. “So, you might just as well take your rightful place and let them stare and be damned.”

The moment Kitty had finished speaking, she cast her eyes heavenwards, clearly remembering that she was in a church. She looked at Isabella with a comical, wide-eyed expression which almost caused her to laugh out loud.

“Oh, Kitty.” Isabella was surprised at how quickly her tone had turned from one of embarrassment and panic to one of amusement. “But you will sit with me, will you not?”

“I shall sit there with you if you wish.” Kitty smiled at her, her dark eyes brimming with warmth in her thin, pale face.

Isabella walked down the central aisle with Kitty in tow as she made her way down to the front of the church and the Duchy of Coldwell pew. As she did so, she realized that her movement had caused many of those present to turn and look at her once more. Quite what they were expecting to see, she could not say.

What she *could* say was that many of those who stared were the very people who had greeted her warmly week in week out throughout the years she had attended the church. It was as if, by nothing more than a simple marriage, she had become not just a different person, but almost a different species of being.

She had become a curiosity, and she knew it. Isabella also knew that when a person became a curiosity, none would dare to enquire after

her outright. None would ask the questions that they wanted to ask and would simply hope that they would find it out at some later date in the tried and foolishly trusted method of gossip.

Isabella mused that nothing had changed about her appearance; there was nothing new about her to stare at. Even her clothes were not different, for she had chosen to wear one of her old gowns, rather than one of the new ones that the Duke had commissioned for her.

The only thing that had changed was her circumstances. As far as the congregation was concerned, she had been sold to the monster by a father who thought absolutely nothing of her. Well, that was in part true. She *had* been sold by a father who thought absolutely nothing of her. But now, after her first few weeks of married life, Isabella was quite sure that the man to whom she had been married away was not a monster.

Despite her newfound defiance, by the time she had gained the safety of the front pew, Isabella felt greatly relieved. It was not an easy thing to have all eyes on you, and she suddenly had a dreadful sense of what it must be like to be Elliot. She understood now exactly what it was that might induce him to dress differently when he was out and about on the grounds in daylight. He did not want to be seen; he did not want to be stared at. And in his position, worst of all was likely the idea that someone could not bear to look upon him and would, instead of staring, cast their eyes immediately away.

What a great effect something as simple as the look of another could have upon the soul. How it could make one feel so many things; embarrassment, defeat, anger, resentment. Not one of those feelings was good.

Isabella had hardly heard a word that the Reverend had said that morning. She was so distracted by her own cacophony of mixed feelings that she could not concentrate.

It was her first visit to church since she had been married and, ordinarily, Isabella had always enjoyed the services there. However, she had enjoyed them from the comfortable position of not feeling at all resentful towards any other member of the congregation.

If only Esme had been there, Isabella felt sure she would have felt very different indeed. Esme would have warmed her heart and strengthened her resolve, but Esme had returned her letter some days before to tell her that she would be away with her family in the Midlands visiting relatives, and very likely was, at that moment, attending a church service more than a hundred miles away.

Still, Isabella had Kitty for support, and she was very grateful for her.

Despite the fact that Isabella and Elliot had been able to converse a little more freely of late, Isabella had not expected that she would be

free to attend the church.

Elliot and everybody who worked on the estate attended private services in the little chapel where Isabella and Elliot had been married.

The services were a little later in the day and were performed by the same minister who had presided over their marriage. From what Kitty told her, the Minister came from a small chapel somewhere east of the Coldwell Estate and routinely performed a service at the Coldwell Chapel as soon as he had finished ministering to his own little congregation.

But as much as she missed Sunday morning services, Isabella could not bring herself to accept spiritual guidance from a man who had behaved as the Minister had. He had known that she had been married against her will and he, a man of God, had done nothing to help her.

She knew, of course, that no man of God would have done. There was not a reverend, a priest, or a minister anywhere in the county who would have gone against a Duke and an Earl. Apparently, they found it very much easier to go against their own God, the God they claimed to serve unequivocally.

“We have a service here at Coldwell every Sunday if you care for it,”

Elliot had said to her when the subject of church had been touched upon during one of their evening meetings in the drawing room.

“I used to attend the church down in the village, Elliot,” Isabella had said by way of explanation.

Of course, it was not any loyalty to her old church which was holding her back from attending family chapel, and she knew it. But what else could she say to him?

“You may attend the Coldwell Chapel with me if you wish it. If you do not, then I shall not force you. You might think that you have very little to give thanks for currently or very little to pray for. I daresay that is quite natural. But you may attend any time you wish, anytime at all.”

“I am afraid that I do not wish to be preached to by a minister who would…” Isabella could not finish.

Although she could only see the perfect side of his face in the gloom, she felt sure that she could see enough to see the sadness there.

“You would not wish to be preached to by a minister who would see a young woman fainted away at the sight of her husband and continue on as if everything was well?”

“I realize that men of God oversee the marriage of many a young woman who has been forced into it, and they do nothing. It is the way of things; I know this,” Isabella began cautiously. “And it would seem almost impossible to give you an explanation of my feelings on the matter without also causing some insult to you. I would not wish to cause such insult, and all I can do is give my explanation as truthfully as possible.”

“Of course,” he said flatly.

“I do not think that a man who can perform such a ceremony when he is under no illusion about the young lady’s part in it is a man that I can accept spiritual guidance from. That is not a true man of God, in my opinion, and I would not be able to concentrate on my prayers in his presence. I hope this does not offend, Elliot, and I realize that if you say I must go, then I must, but I would rather not.”

“You need not do anything you do not wish to do.” Elliot reiterated his earlier sentiment. “But you need not go without spiritual guidance altogether. Perhaps you would prefer to go to the church in the village again? I used to attend myself and can understand your attachment.”

“You would have no objection to my going there?” Isabella was entirely surprised.

“No, I would have none.” As he spoke, Isabella had studied his perfect

left side in the gloom. “All of the servants on the estate attend the chapel here, but you may take Kitty with you if you wish for the company.”

“I would be very pleased to attend the church in the village Elliot, and if Kitty is willing, I shall take her with me. Thank you.”

As Isabella sang with the congregation who had stared at her and made her feel so uncomfortable, she wondered if she was as pleased to attend the church in the village now as she had been previously. Perhaps she would have been better off simply putting up with the guidance of the Minister who had seemed to her so morally redundant.

Her attention was drawn by Kitty, who seemed to be surreptitiously returning the gaze of somebody on a pew across the aisle from them.

Of course, it was her family’s own pew, the Earl of Upperton’s pew. Why Isabella had not even thought to look that way when she had entered the church was beyond her. She had known all along that her family would be there, her mother, her father, and her brother, Anthony.

But she had not considered what she would say to them if she found herself in conversation because she could not imagine such a thing. Isabella had decided to ignore them completely; they were nothing to

her anymore.

But it would seem that the same could not be said for them, or perhaps it was simply that they were as curious as the rest of the congregation that the monster had let his prisoner free from the tangled green barrier of hawthorns which surrounded his evil castle on all sides.

Either way, Isabella was not at all interested. She kept her eyes facing front although she was vaguely aware that Kitty continued to return her family's glances.

Now that her discomfort at the stares of people who she had once considered acquaintances was leaving her, a new sense of disquiet was moving in to take its place. Isabella could not escape the impression that she would have to have some conversation or other with her parents before leaving the church that day.

She did not want to have to explain her life to them anymore. They did not deserve it, and she certainly did not owe it to them. But a part of her wanted to tell them that she was not a prisoner, not trapped, and not afraid. Not because it would put their minds at rest, but because it would signal some small victory over her father. She had survived.

How complicated it all was. How tangled family life could be.

The moment the ceremony was over, Isabella made haste, taking Kitty by the hand and whispering in her ear that she wanted to leave immediately. However, her father had moved very quickly indeed and was already standing at the end of her pew, essentially blocking her exit, by the time she reached it.

“Lord Upperton,” she said in a sarcastic tone.

Isabella had already determined never to refer to the Earl as her father again. He did not deserve so great a title, the greatest title of them all.

“Isabella, I have something I would speak with you about.”

“I cannot think that there is anything to be said between us, Lord Upperton.”

“Am I not your father anymore?” he said with his old aggression, his old antagonism.

“Were you ever?” she spat angrily. “I would thank you to take a step backward away from me, Lord Upperton.”

“I can see that you are still a little angry with me, Isabella.”

“I am unmoved by you altogether. Still, we are no longer family, and

so it is of little matter. I beg you would excuse me," she said and made to push past him.

"Very clever, Isabella." He grasped her upper arm very hard and hissed into her ear, "You might think that you are out of my reach now that you are married, but you are mistaken. I might not be permitted to hurt you any longer, but I am still married to your mother, and I am permitted to do to her whatever I wish."

His threat was very clear, and Isabella perceived his meaning immediately. If she did not stand and listen to him, if she did not pay him the old respect that she thought herself free from, he would hurt her mother as a means of punishing her. If she was honest, Isabella did not really know how she felt about it.

"What is it you wish to speak about?" Isabella said and pulled her arm away from her father's grasp so roughly that she knew she had done much to ensure that she would be bruised.

"I would like you to petition your husband to provide more funds for Upperton Hall. It would seem that we are in much graver circumstances than I had first calculated, and so I must ask for the settlement made upon you to be increased."

"The settlement is already made, and it has been paid. I am married away, and I cannot see any incentive for the Duke to accept your

request.”

“That is for you to work out, Isabella. You will find a way of convincing the Duke to accept my request or you will hear of the consequences.”

“I cannot ask my husband to provide you with more money. You must ask him yourself, Lord Upperton.”

“You will ask him, Isabella, or your mother will pay very dearly for it.” He looked at her with the purest hatred before turning to march away along the aisle and out of the church.

“Are you quite well?” Kitty said and took her hand.

“I shall be well, Kitty. I shall be well,” Isabella said and felt anything but.

Chapter 11

“You did not attend church this Sunday past, Isabella.” Elliot did not question her harshly.

They had not met on the Sunday evening since Elliot had matters to discuss with Crawford Maguire, and he had waited until the Monday to inquire.

More than a week since her attendance at the village church, Isabella had not yet recovered from the shock of seeing her father and hearing his demands and threats.

If only she had attended the Coldwell Chapel and bitten back her own principals regarding the Minister, then she would never have seen her father, and he would not have been able to make his threat. He would not have been reminded of her existence in the world and, had he any thoughts of securing more money from the Duke of Coldwell; he would have been forced to approach the man on his own account.

Of course, Isabella had not yet ruled out the idea that she would never mention it to her husband and that her father would have to make his own addresses. And her mother would have to fend for herself, as Isabella had always done. Still, she could hardly bear to think of it and had as yet come to no conclusion.

“No, I did not attend.” Isabella wondered how she would explain it without telling the truth entirely. “I am afraid that the congregation made me feel most uncomfortable.”

“I daresay they had their questions and plenty of them.” Elliot sounded vaguely amused, and something about his tone made her feel a little better about it all.

“I think they did have plenty of questions, but not one of them had the courage to approach and ask. In fact, not one of them had the courage to approach me at all, not even to bid me a good morning.”

“A disfigurement such as mine is very far-reaching. I am sorry to tell you that you are now disfigured by association.” He laughed although it was not as full of mirth as it might have been.

“They may think what they will,” Isabella snapped angrily, although not at Elliot but at the thought of the congregation, the people who had once made up the circle of her acquaintance. “I do not care to return to that church.”

“Not attending a church does not necessarily make one godless, Isabella. A prayer can be made anywhere, can it not? Who is really to say that it needs to be made in front of men of assorted and occasionally dubious levels of devotion?”

“You make a good point, Elliot.” Isabella laughed, determined to lighten the mood. “But I think I shall attend the Coldwell Chapel with you to be on the safe side. After all, one cannot be too careful.”

“No, indeed.” Through the dim light of late evening, Isabella could see Elliot throw his head back as he laughed heartily.

Once again, she was struck by how affecting the sound was, how resonant and real. It had a quality which made her want to close her eyes and enjoy it all the more.

“And what of your family? Were they not in church last Sunday when you attended?” Elliot went on.

“Yes, they were,” Isabella said quietly.

“Did you manage to have a few moments’ conversation?”

“I hardly saw my mother; she was just a vague figure on the other side of the church. My brother, I did not care to look for, and my father appeared at the end of our pew for a few moments’ conversation at the end of the service. I did not stop long, for I did not wish to speak to him particularly.”

“But there is nothing troubling you on that account? Your parents and

your brother are quite well, I trust?"

"They certainly seem to be in good health, I thank you." Isabella did not want to continue to discuss her relations for fear that Elliot would probe further.

She understood now why it was that he did not wish to be pitied, for she knew that she did not wish it herself. Elliot, in his own words, had enjoyed the most excellent parents. Something about his great fortune in that regard made Isabella feel all the more impoverished in terms of her own family. She did not want to be reminded just how much had been missing in her world, how much was still missing.

"Perhaps, given time, you might feel a little differently about your father and even the church. As much as you say that you would wish to now attend the chapel here, you are not bound to do so. You are free to change your mind."

"No, I shall stay here. At least the servants do not stare."

"No, they do not. But then I have chosen them carefully. Or at least Kitty and Crawford have; I did not have anything to do with the interviewing. As you can imagine, such a thing would not work well."

"Kitty and Crawford have chosen your staff?"

“Yes, I have given them free rein. They do not advertise, you see, but seek people out most specifically. They choose people who are discreet and are often friends of friends or distant family members. They are selected for their ability to understand my particular circumstances and to not discuss any part of my circumstances outside of the estate. They are very well reimbursed for their loyalty and very soon get used to my way of doing things. Those who do not care for my appearance are bright enough to find ways of working around it. I care not, as long as the estate is well cared for, the grounds tended, and the boundary maintained.”

“Kitty has been employed here for a number of years, has she not?”

“I can hardly remember a time before Kitty, that much is true. She arrived when I was a boy of no more than seven or eight years, and I cannot remember much before that anyway. She was a young woman then, of course, and I always liked her a good deal. Kitty would never put up with my antics, you see; she would never suffer any cheek or impertinence from the little boy who thought he was a little Duke in waiting.” Elliot laughed.

“I can quite well imagine Kitty being very firm indeed.” She laughed too as she thought of Elliot as a young boy.

He was a truly self-effacing man and, although he had described himself as perhaps an arrogant child, Isabella could not begin to

compare him to her own brother, Anthony.

“She was very firm, and rightly so.” Elliot stretched his arms high above his head before collapsing his hands back into his lap once more. It was a very relaxed action, one which spoke of a growing comfort in her company. And as she stared at his handsome profile in the lamplight, Isabella realized that she found him very attractive indeed. It was a most confusing feeling because she did not know if she simply found half of him attractive or all of him. “And whenever I took my little tales of woe to my father, I would be in trouble all over again. He always took Kitty’s part and said that if she had cause to tell me off for anything, then that must surely mean that I had done something wrong.”

“And so, you learned to be a better young man.”

“Yes, I think I did.”

“I am certain of it.” Once again, she thought of Anthony.

He also traded heavily on the fact that he would one day hold a great title, just as the young Elliot had once done. However, Anthony had been raised that way and never once chastised for poor behaviour. He had not been steered away from arrogance by his father, just as the old Duke had steered Elliot away, but he had been pushed towards it. He was a young man who had been tipped into the same mould that

his father had been fashioned from. It was a very different situation altogether, surely.

There was much that Isabella wanted to ask about it, or at least discuss. Such as Kitty's time as lady's maid to the last Duchess. But Isabella knew that to raise such subjects would be to pry. But she did not want the evening to end the way they had so often before, with Elliot turning suddenly silent and calling an early close to things.

"And you have known Mr Maguire for a long time?" She changed direction a little but knew that she was still questioning.

"I have known Crawford since we were boys at Eton. We became immediate friends in that way that young men do when they are sent away from home for the first time. And I daresay we have been firm friends ever since."

"And does Mr Maguire live close to here?"

"Yes, he has a very fine manor house on the edge of the county. It is a little distance away, but he stays here a good deal. He has kept rooms here these last eighteen years, and it made good sense for me to provide him with a study since he undertakes a good part of my Duchy responsibilities for me. I would call him a steward if he were not my friend." He paused for a moment. "He does not work so hard for me because he needs some occupation. My dear friend was all set

for a life of leisure; that much is true. He is here purely and simply because of our friendship, and I know that I have much to be grateful for in that regard."

"Mr. Maguire does not maintain any other sort of work then?"

"No, he is a gentleman in every sense and has a large fortune to rely upon. He helps me out of great kindness and because we are friends. I must admit, I had always imagined that Crawford would drift away from me little by little when he finally found himself a wife. I had fully expected it and would not have imposed upon him any longer. Of course, he is still a bachelor, but I daresay there is hope for him yet. Like me, he is but eight and thirty years, and I have every hope that he will find himself a very fine wife."

"Yes, he is a very pleasant man," Isabella said, recalling the details of their first and only conversation. "But I have never seen him since my first meeting with him. I think I had imagined seeing him about the place a good deal. At least that was the impression that I got in the beginning."

"Yes, he is often to be found in his study or in the library. And he does spend a good deal of time with me also. You see, he has done his very best over the years to stave off the loneliness that comes with the sort of isolation I have imposed upon myself."

“So, you still see him, Elliot?”

“Not quite as often in these last weeks.” Elliot smiled. “Because he now gathered that I am not quite as isolated as once I was, given that I am now a married man.” Elliot sounded a little unsure.

“Then you must miss him.”

“I do miss his company, but for its own sake. I do not miss him because I am pitying my own isolation, but because I miss Crawford as a person. He has always been extraordinary company, and when the two of us are in merriment over some ridiculous thing or other, I am reminded of the boys we once were. He is a very fine person, and I would not begrudge him his freedom now. I never sought to make him my keeper, and yet he appointed himself to that role.”

“Then he is a very fine man.”

“He is the finest friend I have ever had.” Elliot seemed to stare vaguely into the gloom. “Besides Kitty, Crawford is the only one who did not turn his back when I first became this way.” He raised a hand unconsciously to the ruined side of his face and left it there for a moment. “Everybody else seemed to disappear in a heartbeat. Friends, distant family, even servants hastened to find positions elsewhere. Some could not bear to look upon me and others, well…” He stopped and was silent.

Isabella wanted him to finish what he was saying; she wanted to hear it all.

Was there something to tell beyond his disfigurement? Had his servants abandoned him for some other reason? Something besides finding themselves unable to look upon his face?

“I think it is true to say, Elliot, that a person only really ever has one or two true friends in a lifetime. The rest are simply acquaintances and nothing more.” Isabella held her curiosity in check as her compassion took over. “I have only ever known the friendship of one person in this world, and I am sure that she will be my finest friend also until the day I die. Her name is Esme Montague, and we have known each other since we were children, just like you and Crawford. My family was not comfortable company for as long as I can remember, and yet Esme did what she could to ignore that and stuck fast to me no matter what. I daresay friendship like that cannot be matched or replaced, can it?”

“No, it most certainly cannot.” Elliot’s voice had grown a little distant, and Isabella began to think that he would soon withdraw altogether, and the evening would be over.

But she did not want the evening to be over.

“I would also wish that Esme would find a very fine marriage, just as you hope for Crawford. It is, perhaps, the best we can do for such fine people.”

“Do you miss your friend?” Elliot said quietly.

“I do miss her. Although I am very grateful that you have allowed me to maintain the correspondence.”

“What sort of a man did you think I was when you first came here? Did you really think I was such an ogre that I would not allow you any contact at all with the outside world?”

“You sound angry with me, Elliot, and I understand it. But you must understand that I did not know what sort of a man you were; and I did not know if, in your heart, you were an ogre or not. I was just afraid, and that was all. And so much was out of my control, *everything* was out of my control, and I think it a little harsh of you to blame me for my feelings at that time. But to answer your question as truthfully as I can, I had assumed that you would *not* allow contact with the outside world, yes.”

“Forgive me; you have every right to challenge my mood.”

“But I would not wish to.”

“Perhaps you do not wish to, but you must. It is very easy for a man in my circumstances to fall into self-pity and bitterness. But it is a place I have fought to keep myself out of these eighteen years, and I would be grateful to you if you would not allow me to indulge myself. You must challenge me, do you understand?”

“I understand, Elliot.” And she did.

Isabella knew exactly how it made a person feel to embrace the role of the victim. She knew exactly because she had felt it herself from the moment she realized what a cruel and uncaring man her father was. And to know how her mother would never defend her had only served to reinforce it, to make it real. Isabella had been a victim, and she had felt very sorry for herself. But there came a time when she realized that she had decided to see herself that way, had played the story of her life over and over again in her mind and almost encouraged herself to feel worse and worse. It was a spiral towards a seemingly bottomless pit, and one she would never care to visit again. And if she could do anything to keep Elliot from falling in, she would do it.

“And if you would like your friend to visit, you may ask her. It is true that I do not have visitors myself, besides Crawford, but there is no reason why you cannot. If you would care to, you must arrange it with Kitty.”

Isabella felt suddenly like crying. She knew what Elliot’s privacy

meant to him, and how hard it would be for him to open the doors of his mythical, protected castle to the outside world. Even just one person.

And she understood entirely that *arranging it with Kitty* meant that Elliot had no intention of meeting Esme himself. For some reason, that made her feel dreadfully sad. If only she could come to terms with her own emotions and lay them out in order so that she might have a better idea of how to deal with them.

“Thank you, Elliot.” It was all that Isabella could think of to say, and she was surprised to hear her voice had given away her emotion.

In truth, she did not know if Esme could ever be tempted to come in through the tangled boundary and approach the monster’s lair.

Chapter 12

Almost two months had gone by since Isabella had married the Duke of Coldwell. Isabella could hardly believe that when she had first married him, she had not assumed even surviving as long as this, never mind that she would be almost content.

If she could have changed anything at all, apart from the most obvious, she would have removed her feelings of isolation. It was a theme upon which Elliot had spoken more than once, and each time she heard it, she began to identify with his loneliness.

Nothing had changed about their circumstances, and their meetings carried on much the same as always, barring the fact that it was now summer. The light evenings had meant that their meetings in the drawing room had grown increasingly late to accommodate for the extended hours of daylight.

Isabella had not encountered Elliot out in the grounds ever since the day she had been to the tower, and she had begun to worry that he had taken to keeping himself indoors from that moment onwards.

The very idea of it upset her greatly, but she could not think of a way to approach the subject. It was certainly one of those issues which would undoubtedly put an untimely end to their conversation, as

always.

Instead, she comforted herself with the idea that he had been outside but that she had not seen him. She had not been out to the tower herself since that first day; she could not face it. Whenever she thought of the blackened walls and the untouched but dirty porcelain face of the little doll, Isabella shuddered. In so many weeks, she had been unable to shake the desolate feelings which overtook her whenever she thought of the place.

It had largely kept her out of the woodland for fear of stumbling upon the tower even if she wandered down a different pathway. She did not know the lay of the land well enough to keep herself away from the tower, and she knew from experience how quickly one came upon it, how unexpectedly.

Instead, Isabella had kept herself to the gardens which were, in all honesty, the most extensive she had ever seen. There were open expanses of immaculate lawn and neat rows of brightly coloured blooms everywhere. But there were also areas of great interest, walled gardens being most plentiful. Every time she found something new, Isabella gave a silent prayer of thanks to whomever it was that had created so beautiful an estate and grounds so many years before.

She would dearly have loved to have walked the grounds with Esme, for they had spent much of their time doing just that in the past. They

had always liked to walk and talk each parting with harmless gossip or telling their hopes and dreams for the future to the other, stride upon stride.

Although Isabella and Esme had exchanged several letters, Isabella had yet to find the courage to ask her friend to call upon her at Coldwell Hall.

She had not even begun to make inroads into the thing with hints, for Esme knew her almost as well as she knew herself and would see it most clearly.

The problem was that Isabella did not want to put Esme in a dreadful position. In Esme's mind, the tales they used to tell each other of the monster in the castle behind the tangle of impenetrable foliage might still loom large. The very idea of attending might well strike fear into Esme's heart, and Isabella could not bear it.

She could not bear the idea that Esme would accept the invitation out of love to her friend, all the while worrying and feeling fearful of such a visit.

But worse than that, Isabella could not bear the thought that Esme might refuse. It would seem like the end of their friendship, even if they continued to correspond. If she did not test that friendship, Isabella would not have to think about something as final as that

refusal.

And yet, as she walked the gardens and leaned forward to draw in the wonderful scent of the roses, Isabella could not help dreaming of how wonderful it would be to have her friend with her every so often.

Still, those were musings for another day. Perhaps she ought not to invite Esme until she knew the truth of everything about Coldwell Hall. Not, of course, that she suspected Elliot of anything dreadful, but she knew there was something to know; something that had remained untold.

Not a secret, exactly, but an omission of some sort that she thought it would do well to know.

Not just because of Esme and the implications of inviting her dear friend to see her, but because of her own standing in the house and her own understanding of her husband and the family who had once shared that fine, enormous mansion with him.

And it was in that very spirit that Isabella began to find herself exploring more and more. Whilst she had determined not to return to the tower, she had not turned her back on her quest for knowledge. Instead, she turned her attention to the house itself and wandered at will, just as she had been assured she might.

As always, Isabella moved quietly around the house, silently scuttling down corridors and wondering if she might, at any moment, come face-to-face with her husband. Quite why it had become something to fear, she could not say, for she had grown to look forward to their meetings in the evenings.

She was coming to find her husband good company and, whenever some business or other kept him from their nightly conversation, Isabella had found herself disappointed.

But still the shock of seeing him that day out in the woodland had not left her. Not just the shock of once again setting eyes upon the red and purple ruined skin, but to see how her own sudden appearance had affected him. Isabella did not want to put him through that again, although she was beginning to find each day growing increasingly longer, stretching out ahead of her until all she felt she had was time.

Perhaps that was why she had come to look forward to her conversations with her husband. Perhaps it was loneliness which was driving her to hasten to the drawing room every night and to feel a growing sense of disappointment when she felt the evenings drawing to a close.

If she had other company throughout the day, would she willingly choose to spend the evenings with Elliot?

After some weeks of silent investigations, Isabella had felt sure she had identified the chamber that her husband used. She had walked by the door on the west side of Coldwell Hall, the opposite end from where she slept, many times.

After several days of intermittent hovering and listening, Isabella had finally found the courage to open the door. She had pushed it inwards very gently, relieved to find it unlocked. In her mind, she had a plan; if she found her husband there, she would claim herself to be lost and apologize that her exploration of her new home had taken her so far. She knew, of course, that it was a particularly weak excuse, but she could come up with no other and, in the end, she went ahead.

Isabella had crept into the room, pleased to find that it was empty. Elliot must be somewhere else altogether, perhaps even in Crawford Maguire's study in deep and fortifying conversation. Wherever he was, she knew she had at least a few minutes to indulge her curiosity.

The room was large although certainly no larger than her own one. She felt sure that it was not the biggest bedroom in the mansion and wondered why Elliot might have chosen not to take the very best for himself. Still, the room was very nice indeed and painted in the same light cream colour of her own walls.

It seemed that her husband was fond of making the internal spaces of Coldwell Hall seem as bright as if the daylight truly happened within.

Whilst all the windows had beautiful and thick curtains hanging at them, there were no great sweeping pelmets anywhere, nothing to hinder the progress of whatever sunshine might be available. It was the same everywhere, Isabella felt sure.

Poor Elliot; he both loved and feared the daylight.

There was a great four-poster bed in the room with a dark green bedspread over the crisp, bright white linens. It looked as comfortable as her own and, for a moment, Isabella imagined Elliot in it, comfortable and relaxed, safe from the eyes of the world with his door closed.

Isabella walked a little further into the room, creeping almost on tiptoe so as not to make a sound. There was a great sense of Elliot in the room, with books everywhere on tables and shelves and, cast aside on an armchair as if it was sitting there in person, his violin.

Isabella smiled when she saw it, remembering the beauty of the melody she had heard that night so many weeks ago. The melody that he had composed himself. She could only draw part of the tune to mind and wished for all the world that she could remember it in its entirety.

It had been a haunting melody, one which she had felt sure had come straight from his heart. It almost described him in some way.

There were few paintings on the walls, just as in her own room. It seemed that Elliot did not care to cover the lightness and do anything to darken the room at all. But there was one small portrait at the far side of his room, the opposite side from his own bed. It was a portrait that he would have been able to see quite clearly as he lay in repose, and she wondered if that was why it had been hung there in that position.

Again, she crept silently deeper into the room so that she might study the portrait closely. It was the head and shoulders of a young woman, a girl really, likely still in her younger years. She was perhaps just twelve or thirteen.

Although Isabella had not met the girl in question, the subject of the portrait, she felt sure that the painter had made a good likeness. She recognized the dark ash brown hair instantly as being as thick and soft-looking as Elliot's own hair. But it was the eyes more than anything that made her draw in her breath, for they were the brightest green and so like Elliot's that they might have been drawn out from his own face.

"That is Lady Eleonora, His Grace's sister." Kitty's voice startled her so badly that Isabella shrieked.

She spun around to look at her maid and could see that she carried

fresh bedsheets in her arms.

“Oh, Kitty,” Isabella said in a tone which suggested shame and embarrassment; she had been caught out in the act of prying.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Kitty said and inclined her head respectfully. “I had not meant to startle you, and I spoke quite without thinking. I really am terribly sorry.” Kitty looked frozen suddenly, displaying some of the shame and embarrassment that Isabella felt.

“Think nothing of it, Kitty,” Isabella said kindly and was pleased when Kitty laid the sheets down on top of the bedspread, returning to normal. “Oh, this is just silly. You have caught me here prying into my husband’s room, and I am embarrassed. And now you are embarrassed, and it is too much. For goodness sake, let us dispense with these feelings, Kitty, what do you say?”

“I think that would be a great relief.” Kitty smiled at her in that motherly way, and Isabella knew that her maid had returned to her ordinary state of confidence and comfort. “And if you do not mind me saying, it is hardly prying for a wife to be inside her husband’s own room, is it? You are married, and His Grace has not barred the door to you.”

“No, I suppose he has not. But perhaps he expected a certain amount of privacy. Perhaps he did not think he needed to lock his door against

me."

"And perhaps he would never lock his door against you. Perhaps his door would always be open to you, my dear."

Isabella was sure that she understood Kitty's meaning. The door was not simply open to her in daylight hours so that she might look at the decor and the view from the window, or study at close quarters the portrait of his young sister. The door was open to her permanently, in the darkness of night also. Isabella felt her cheeks flush a little but determined to say nothing more about it.

"Kitty, forgive me for being so curious and so inquisitive, but did Eleanor die in the tower in the woodland?" She turned from Kitty to look up at the fresh and innocent face of the young girl in the portrait.

"Yes, Lady Eleanor did die in the tower. There was a fire, you see, and she and her mother were trapped inside."

"And that was eighteen years ago?"

"Yes, Lady Eleanor was but twelve years old." Kitty blinked hard, and Isabella could see tears shining in her eyes. She knew that she could ask no more of the woman than she had done already. "To think that she would have been thirty years now, likely with many children and a fine husband. Life can be so very cruel, can it not?"

“Yes, life can be very cruel indeed.” Isabella wanted to ask more, but when she saw the first of Kitty’s tears roll down her face, she knew she could not.

She crossed the room quickly and, without a moment’s hesitation, pulled Kitty into her arms and held her tightly. Kitty felt small and thin in her arms, her bones prominent, and her shoulders tiny. She leaned against Isabella completely and cried the tears which had no doubt been cried again and again over the years whenever she was reminded of the tragedy of Coldwell Hall.

“Forgive me.” Kitty’s voice was barely audible.

“There is nothing to forgive, Kitty. I truly am so very sorry for the loss you suffered. And I am even sorrier to have reminded you of it with my own curiosity. It is I who must beg your forgiveness and not the other way around.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Kitty began to straighten up and searched in the long sleeve of her dark gown for a handkerchief.

“Here, take this,” Isabella said and hurriedly handed Kitty her own.

Chapter 13

“Isabella, forgive me, but did your father approach you with some purpose when you attended the church in the village all those weeks ago?” Elliot’s tone was unreadable, and Isabella felt an old familiar stab of anxiety.

It was the anxiety which had always overtaken her whenever her father requested an audience with her at Upperton Hall when she had still lived under that roof.

“He did,” she began uncertainly. “I ought to have said as much, I see that now.” She hung her head a little.

“No, you need not have said anything if you did not want to. And I do not ask to chastise you in any way for not being entirely frank with me. I am just concerned that you had suffered a little at your father’s hands if he made the same demand of you that he has recently made of me.”

“So, he has asked you for money, Elliot?” Isabella could feel her cheeks flaming with shameful heat.

How could her father have done such a thing? How could he have been so bold as to approach the Duke himself?

“He has. I received a letter from him this morning and, please forgive me, but I discussed it with Crawford. I had begun to speak of it before I had thought it through properly, but I must assure you that Crawford is the most discreet of men, and I am truly sorry that I spoke without thinking. I am so used to discussing Duchy matters in full with my old friend that it comes as second nature.”

“You need not apologize. I am certain that Mr Maguire is completely discreet, even if my own father is not.”

If she was honest, Isabella did feel ashamed. She would have preferred that Elliot had kept that particular piece of business quiet, although she understood entirely how easy it was to forget oneself. She did not blame him.

“He tells me that he made some miscalculation, and that he would have asked me for a greater settlement at the time had he realized it.”

“That is very like my father to present the matter in such a way as to release him from any idea of blame in the thing. I can only apologize and assure you that I had nothing to do with it. It is of little matter to me if the estate of Upperton falls to the ground and disintegrates into dust.”

“Is that why you did not ask me yourself?”

“Yes. And I believe it to be wrong, Elliot. Despite the pressure that my father brought to bear, the threats he made, I could not see how it was your debt to pay. And so, after much thought, I chose to say nothing at all.”

“So, the Earl *did* ask you to approach me on the subject? Is that why you never returned to the church?”

“In part,” Isabella said truthfully. “When I told you that I was uncomfortable with the curious behaviour of my old acquaintances, I spoke the truth. I decided against telling you of my father’s behaviour. I am afraid that I was made very ashamed by it, and I would not have wanted you to think that I condoned it in any way.”

“I understand; you have no need to make yourself uneasy. I can see why you had chosen to keep it to yourself, and I do not blame you for it.”

“I thank you for your kindness.”

“And the sum, whilst large, is something that I can easily pay. If I am honest, if your father had requested a greater sum, in the beginning, I would have paid it. And so, you see, it is of no detriment to me to give him the money.”

“You do not owe it to him, Elliot. You made your agreement with my father, and that ought to be final. I would not have you expect to pay out every time my father miscalculates. It is not right, and he does not deserve such consideration from you. You forget that he turned on his heels and made haste when I collapsed on our wedding day. He left it to you to ensure that I was well and to deal with whatever the consequences were, and he gave it not a moment’s thought. He turned his back that day, and I think that you ought to turn yours now. He really does not deserve your time or your money.”

“I would not be paying the sum to keep your father happy, nor even keep him solvent. It is entirely a matter of your own comfort and happiness, Isabella. If it would hurt you to think that your family would suffer for lack of funds, I will have the money paid out first thing in the morning. Not only that, but I would never think of it again.”

Realizing that he was speaking the truth, Isabella felt suddenly emotional. Through the wavering vision of tear-filled eyes and the customary gloom of the poorly lit drawing room, she stared at his handsome profile.

At that moment, Isabella wanted to cross the room and throw her arms around him. She wanted to kiss the soft, smooth skin of that side of his face and thank him wholeheartedly for his kindness. Not only for his kindness but for what truly seemed to be his friendship.

However, she remained stuck to her armchair several feet from his side as if unable to move. She felt sure that her husband would be stunned by such a move and even shrink from her embrace. And if she somehow caught sight of the ruined side of his face, or even touched the skin as she embraced him, Isabella wondered if she might also not shrink from his proximity.

“I cannot thank you enough for such kindness, Elliot. Not in respect of my father, but in my own regard. That you would seek to make me comfortable with a situation that I held back from you humbles me, as it should.” She paused long enough to swallow down the thickness in her throat which was threatening to render her mute. “But I do not ask it of you. If I am to have any say in it, I should like to suggest that you do not pay my father another penny.”

“You are still so very angry with your father for sending you here, are you not?”

“I am not angry to be here, Elliot. I am angry with my father’s treatment of me, and I always shall be. In the end, the result does not justify the means of achieving it, and my father, even now, cares not for my happiness. Do not pay him, Elliot. Do not pay him on my account because I do not require it.”

“Before I make my final decision, I must pry a little further, if you will

allow me such an indulgence?"

"Yes, of course." Isabella felt a little uncomfortable, afraid even, as she worried what he might ask her.

"You said that you chose not to tell me *despite* the fact that your father had brought pressure to bear and made threats. Was this when he spoke to you in the church?"

"Yes." Isabella wished she had not been so nervous in the beginning for it had loosened her tongue.

She should have trusted that Elliot would speak to her in a fashion most suited to adults; civilized adults. She should not have suspected him of the same temper and low standards that she had always associated with her father. She should not have been so suddenly and completely afraid of him, for they were two different men.

"What was the threat that he made?" Elliot said in a level tone.

"Elliot, is it necessary for you to know? Forgive me, but I would not change it. I would not tell you something now that would sway your opinion."

"Please, as your husband, I should like to know." It was the first time he had ever described himself as her husband, and Isabella felt that

curious sense of emotion once again.

“I am ashamed to tell you that my father promised to hurt my mother if I did not carry out his demands. He told me that if I did not come to you and request the extra funds, my mother would pay the price for my belligerence.” Once again, her head dropped.

“I am so sorry that you had to go through such a thing.” His voice was quiet, but there was a quality to it that spoke of danger.

It was something that she had not heard before, and Isabella felt sure that he was biting back the most severe anger; anger which he would have wanted to direct to her father.

“Thank you. And I am sorry to have to tell it to you, for such brutish behaviour is most shameful to report.”

“And so, you believed your father’s threat?”

“Yes, or at least I know him to be capable of such things. Whether or not he would actually carry it out is another thing. If he can see no gain it, if there is no way for him to show me what he has done, then he would not bother to do it.”

“But you cannot be sure that he would not?”

“No, I cannot be sure.”

“Then you have seen him treat your mother cruelly in the past?”

“I have seen him frighten her and belittle her, yes.”

“But not hurt her, not physically?”

“No, but my mother never made a false step in front of him. If I am honest, she never made a false step even when he was not there to witness it. She has managed to keep herself safe all these years by never arguing, never questioning, and never defending.”

“Defending herself?” Elliot sounded a little confused.

“No, defending me.”

“Is that how you know exactly what your father is capable of? Because you have stood against him and suffered the consequences?” Elliot’s voice held that dangerous quality once again.

At that moment, Isabella felt something that she had never felt before in all her life; she felt protected. Whilst she had not enjoyed such feelings of safety within the confines of her own family, Isabella had always garnered a great feeling of care from Esme and so knew what it was to be loved genuinely. But Esme would never have been able to

protect her from anything, she could only have done her very best to help her, and that was all.

It had been enough, of course, that Esme had tried to help her plot her own escape from the marriage to the man they had both assumed would be a monster. Isabella had always known that Esme could have done no more than that.

But this feeling of protection, this feeling of great safety, was so sudden and unexpected that she could have cried out with happiness. As fleeting as it was, Isabella knew that she would never forget that moment for as long as she lived.

“Yes, that is how I know what he is capable of. I had always been a little braver than my mother, and it had caused me to object from time to time. And yes, that objection almost always cost me dearly. That is how I know that my father would hurt my mother without a moment’s compunction if it served his purposes. But I cannot protect her from him for she has never done anything to defend herself.”

“And nothing to defend you either?” Elliot’s voice had returned to a gentle and soothing tone.

“No, my mother has seen much misery visited upon me and spoke not a word. Not a word in my defense, not a word for my comfort later on when we were alone. To this day, I do not know if my mother ever

loved me enough to try."

"I am so very sorry, Isabella." For a moment, she thought that Elliot would rise up from his armchair and make his way across the room to comfort her. He made a curious motion in his seat, and she was convinced of it. But, in the end, he kept to his armchair and continued to speak. "And I am sorry that I have put you through so much and made this evening uncomfortable for you. I shall not ask that you see out the entire two hours with me this evening, for I am sure that you would wish to be in your own room so that you can order your own thoughts in private. Please forgive me for upsetting you."

"You have not upset me, Elliot. You have been very kind, and I could ask nothing more than that from you. But yes, I should like a little solitude for a while to think, if you would excuse me."

"Of course."

The moment that Isabella rose to her feet, Elliot did also. It was not in the common way of things as he ordinarily kept to his chair until he was sure that she was out of the room, and he was out of sight. But, tipping his head awkwardly so that his disfigurement was largely hidden, he took her arm to guide her out of the room and continued to walk through the entrance hall with her until she reached the bottom of the stairs.

It felt so strange to be holding her husband's arm; to be so close at his side.

"Go up to your chamber and make yourself comfortable, Isabella, and I shall seek out Kitty and ask her to fetch you some warm milk."

"Thank you, Elliot." She looked at him, catching the briefest glimpse of the purple skin and the raised, shiny ridges of silver.

"Good night, Isabella," he said and quickly turned away from her.

"Good night, Elliot," she replied and watched as he disappeared down the corridor in search of Kitty.

Chapter 14

Things seemed to have evened out a little for Isabella in the days which followed. She had not enjoyed for one moment telling Elliot the details, albeit scant ones, of her old family life. There was, she knew, so much more to tell than she had told, but it had been difficult nonetheless.

However, it had also been strangely cathartic, and she felt a certain sense of peace when she had drunk her milk and put herself to bed after assuring Kitty that she would manage alone that night.

She had slept more soundly than for some time and had even thought it likely she had not slept so well since she had rendered herself unconscious after collapsing to the flagstones of the chapel.

But this was not the sleep of injury; it was the sleep of relief and perhaps a little contentment.

Isabella had gone on to sleep very well for several nights following,and when she had woken not long after retiring some nights later, Isabella found herself surprised.

She had been enjoying her new feeling of comfort and safety and had assumed that her new deep sleeping patterns had been a part of it.

Isabella sat up in bed in the certain knowledge that she would not, not immediately, at any rate, get back to sleep. She knew it was after midnight, and it had been some time since she had eaten dinner. Isabella generally ate dinner before she went into the drawing room to sit with Elliot.

Being awake, she had realized that she was more than a little hungry and thought that if she did not creep down for something to eat; she would find it even harder to return to restful slumber.

With her decision made, Isabella rose from her bed and draped a pale pink shawl around her shoulders. She struck a match and lit the candle to light her way downstairs, even though the moonlight always seemed to stream through into the entrance hall.

When she opened the door and made her way out of the room, she paused for a moment to listen to the silence. Elliot would never hear her, his room being so far away from her own. It was true that she did not know where it was that Crawford Maguire slept when he stayed at Coldwell Hall, but she thought it unlikely that she would happen upon him in the middle of the night on the staircase. After all, she had not happened upon him once, day or night, in all the time she had lived there.

Still, Isabella made a mental note to set about her silent investigations

once more and track down Crawford Maguire's resting chamber. At least then she would have the complete lay of the land in terms of who kept to what part of the house.

She did not know why it was important, or even if it was important at all, but she intended to do it anyway. Perhaps now it was nothing more than simple curiosity, for she did not feel the trepidation and fear that she had felt when first moving there.

The great hallway was lit beautifully by moonlight, just as she had imagined it would be. Nonetheless, there was something comforting about the candle's flame, and she held it steady as she descended the great staircase. When she was but halfway down, Isabella heard a sound she recognized.

It was the violin, although it was not the melody she had heard once before. It was not as haunting, although it was equally as beautiful. As a moth to a flame, Isabella made her way towards the library without a moment to stop, think, and reason. She simply wanted to hear the music.

She stood outside the door for a few moments and listened. The melody that Elliot was playing contained less sadness than the last. It was by no means jaunty, but there was a certain hope and lightness in it that cheered her.

Although she kept to the corridor for a few moments longer, Isabella decided to push the door gently open a little and see if Elliot would allow her admittance.

He perceived the movement immediately, and she was surprised that there was not a single pause in his playing, not a note was missed. He inclined his head a little in the darkness, and she knew that he was beckoning her into the room. She made her way silently in, glad of the candle in the near darkness.

She went immediately to the chair she had sat in the last time the two of them had spent time together in the library. She did not want to do anything different, nothing that would disturb him in his playing.

Isabella set her candle down on the small table beside her chair and leaned back, closing her eyes to enjoy Elliot's playing.

The melody really was beautiful, and Isabella felt sure that it was another one that had never been heard outside the walls of Coldwell Hall. She was certain it was another of Elliot's own compositions, so beautiful was it. What a shame that such a talent was so rarely heard.

As far as she was aware, Isabella was as large an audience as Elliot ever played to. With her eyes still closed, she imagined him night after night sitting in the library playing endless melodies alone. Night after night, year after year.

“Is that another one of your own compositions?” she said after several moments of silence at the end of the piece.

“Yes, it is a new piece. I am not entirely happy with it yet, but I am getting close.”

“It is something that you have lately begun to work on?” she asked with interest.

“Yes, I have been working on it these last weeks.”

Elliot was sitting face onto her, although it was true that the fire had died down to embers, and she could barely see him. The only light in the room was the pale glow from her own candle, and it was certainly not enough to see him in any detail. But still, as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she could just make out the two very distinct sides of Elliot Covington’s face.

Isabella thought him not so difficult to look at after all. However, she knew that things were so much different in the dim glow of a candle, and she was still not sure how she would manage to look upon him in the cold light of day.

“It is very different from the last piece I heard you play, but equally beautiful. I know I have said so already, but your talent is

extraordinary," Isabella spoke softly.

"I hope I did not wake you," he said, and she could see his head tipped to one side in question.

"No, I could not hear you playing, I just awoke suddenly. I must admit that I was a little hungry, and I had crept down to see if I could steal away a piece of bread and butter from the kitchen. But then I heard the violin, and I knew you would be here."

"Do you know where to find it all in the kitchen?"

"No, that is why I brought a candle with me. I thought I might need to have a thorough look. I have only ever been in the kitchen to speak to the cook, and I have never dared help myself to anything. I should not like to incur her wrath." Isabella laughed, and she could hear him laughing too.

"Well, you wait here by the fire, and I shall sneak down into the kitchen," he said in a conspiratorial whisper as he rose to his feet and leaned down to throw another log on the dying embers of the fire.

"I would not put you to any trouble," Isabella said hastily although she was amused by the idea of a Peer of the Realm sneaking down into the kitchen to find some bread and butter for her.

Elliot hurried past her, not bothering to take the candle with him. No doubt he knew exactly where to find everything he needed in the kitchen.

He seemed to move away so noiselessly that it was as if he had never been there at all; as if she had been talking to a ghost. As the embers caught, and the log began to burn a little more brightly, Isabella was aware that the darkness had been lifted a little. Undoubtedly, the prospect had not occurred to Elliot, or he would not have thrown the log on in the first place.

He returned in no time at all carrying a small tray. He set it down on the table beside her next to her little candle holder.

“There, I hope bread-and-butter will do,” he said, and she looked up at him.

Between the candle and the fire, Isabella could see his face quite clearly. It seemed so very strange to look at him face on once again, and she was sharply reminded of her wedding day. That moment when he had turned to face her seemed to have happened slowly as if the world and everything on it had lost its vital speed that day.

However, to look upon him at that moment was a very different thing. His disfigurement was still shocking, that had not changed. But she was no longer made afraid by it. She felt almost upended by what a

great shame it was that so beautiful a face had been destroyed. But not destroyed entirely, only in part.

To be able to see how handsome he really was, if only from one angle, might well have made the whole thing all the crueler, for it showed her most exactly what had been lost on the day he had been burned. And he had lost more than his handsome face that day.

“I hope you are going to eat some, Elliot,” Isabella said and continued to look up at him. “I cannot possibly eat so much bread by myself, and I should not like to waste it.” She laughed.

Elliot hurriedly took two pieces from the top of the great pile of slices on the plate and made his way back to his fireside chair. He seemed to have become excruciatingly aware of the light in the room, and she could feel his awkwardness returning.

“Thank you, I really am very hungry,” she said in as ordinarily a tone as she could manage before biting into one of the thick slices.

“I hope you will be able to sleep a little better once you have eaten.”

“I am sure that I shall,” she said and hungrily took another bite. “The cook really does make the most wonderful bread, does she not?”

“Yes, it was a very fine day when Kitty brought her to me. I have lived

very well these last six years with our current cook."

"And was she somebody that Kitty knew already?" Isabella said, remembering the system of procuring servants that he had described to her in detail.

"Actually, she had been a cook at Crawford's house," Elliot said with a laugh. "Kitty had been over there training up a new maid for Crawford. She often trains his staff, and he is very grateful for it. Anyway, I do not know how she managed to persuade Crawford to part with his cook, but she did. She thought that Mrs Garrett would suit me very well indeed and, in no time at all, that good woman was installed here as my head cook."

"And what of Mr Maguire? Did he not mind at all?" Isabella laughed and thought the whole thing sounded most amusing.

"He made much fuss, believe me." Elliot's laugh grew deeper still, and Isabella could tell that he was genuinely warmed and amused by the memory of it all. "But it was a very good-natured sort of fuss. I could tell that he did not really mind, even though he went on about the thing for days and days. And every time he takes a meal with me here, he comments on all that he has lost."

"But he would have rather that you had Mrs Garrett for yourself. He is a fine friend indeed."

“He is. He immediately realized that it would be a much easier thing for him to go out into the world and find another cook who was equally suitable. He can advertise without any concerns whereas I cannot.”

“And now? If you needed new staff now, would you still have such concerns?”

“I do not know. Perhaps I would not, but likely only because I could hide myself away and leave the responsibility of it all to my wife.” He laughed again.

“And I would not mind the responsibility at all, but I cannot imagine that I would be as proficient at finding the right people as Kitty and Mr. Maguire seem to be.”

“I suppose they are well practiced in dealing with my self-imposed exile.”

“It is good to have people in your life who know you so well,” Isabella said before proceeding cautiously. “Elliot, forgive me for prying, but when was the last time you left Coldwell Hall? When was the last time you set foot out of the estate?”

“Heaven knows I have pried enough into your own life this last week,

Isabella, and I can make no objection to you seeking similar information."

"You may make any objection you wish. And I shall not blame you for it."

"I shall answer you truthfully, Isabella, and tell you that I have not left the Coldwell Estate these last seventeen years. I was but a man of one twenty the last time I made any attempt at being out in society."

Isabella was silent for some minutes, hardly trusting herself to speak for fear that her pity might show itself. She did not want to pity him because she knew he did not want to be pitied, but what a dreadful thing for a young man to keep to one place so long for fear of the reaction of others. It made her want to cry.

"You are shocked, are you not?"

"I am not at all shocked. Given how the society I once shared made me feel on one simple visit to the church, I cannot begin to imagine what it is you suffered at their hands. It does not surprise me for a moment that you have chosen to be away from them, and I am only sorry that you have felt the need to do so for so very long."

"I would not wish to have your pity," he said flatly.

“And you do not have my pity,” she said, fighting hard against it. “But I am sad nonetheless.”

“Well, I thank you for your kindness.”

“What happened? I mean, what caused you to choose that day never to go out again?” Isabella knew that she was on very shaky ground indeed.

“I was still recovering from my injuries, although I was recovered enough to be out of doors again. I had missed the world outside for the year that I had been an invalid, and I had decided to go out to my physician and have him check my progress rather than have him ride out to me. In truth, I had been quite excited by the prospect although understandably nervous.”

“Understandably.” Isabella spoke quietly saying just enough to remind him that she was still there.

“My driver drew up outside the doctor’s office, the very same doctor, in fact, who tended to you when you knocked yourself unconscious. Anyway, the driver I had then had been my father’s driver, and he had long since stopped attempting to look at me. He just could not face it and, back then, I could not blame him. I let myself out of my carriage and began to make my way to the doctor’s door. However, before I was six feet from it, I heard a bloodcurdling scream and looked down

to see a child staring up at me. His mother hastily grabbed his arm and turned him sharply, but not before glaring at me as if I had purposefully caused some offence. The scream and the general commotion caused others to look at me, and it seemed as if the entire street had suddenly filled with people, all of whom were intent upon staring at me to indulge their curiosity to the fullest." He paused, and Isabella remained silent. She did not want to say anything that might dissuade him from continuing. "At that moment, I could not stand it. I realized that I had made a grave error in seeking to reinsert myself into the world at large. I felt the greatest sense of being in the wrong place, of being wrong as a man. I wanted nothing more than to be away from there, to fly back into my carriage and have the driver urge my horses away."

"So, you left?"

"I turned on my heel and charged back towards my carriage. The driver turned briefly but never once attempted to climb down from his seat on the top of the carriage. He simply left me there, and I realized then that I was not even the Duke anymore. I was Duke in name only, but not a man who would command an ounce of respect anywhere I went ever again. Even my own driver could not look upon me; he could not even open the door to my carriage."

"I hope you dismissed him."

“I can hardly remember what happened back then. If I were to guess, I would say that I had related the incident to Crawford and that he likely dismissed the driver. It was then that Crawford and Kitty began to take a good deal of interest in exactly who came here to Coldwell Hall to make their living.”

“And you have not been out since then?”

“No,” he said in a dry voice. “As I had desperately tried to open the door of the carriage, sudden nervousness and shame overtaking me entirely, I heard laughter. The crowd that had gathered, once the shock of my appearance had worn off and their gasps had ceased, began to find my plight most amusing. The more they laughed, the more I became flustered and could not get the door open properly. It seemed to take forever, and all the while I could hear their laughter. Men, women, and children, all of them laughing at the disfigured Duke who could not even escape them successfully.”

“That is truly despicable,” Isabella said in a low voice and felt a sudden surge of the purest anger.

“I had been quite determined to go out again, to give myself a little respite and to make another attempt. But every time I thought to do so, the sound of the laughter came back, and it seemed so much louder than the scream of the child and so much more destructive to my soul.”

“I am not surprised.”

“Every time I thought to go out again, I knew that I truly would not. I always found a reason why I could not go, and not very plausible reasons, it must be said. But I was fooling nobody, not even myself. In the end, I decided to admit that I was never going to leave Coldwell Hall again. When my decision was made, I cannot begin to tell you the strength of the relief that washed over me. I knew I would never have to face them again, and I felt glad.”

“Elliot, I am so very sorry,” Isabella began, “but might things not be different if you tried again?”

“I have often wondered over the years. But when I heard how you had been treated at church, a beautiful woman with not a blemish anywhere, I knew that nothing was different. It is the instinct of groups to act as a single entity. They all turn as one, stare as one, and laugh as one as if they are all functioning by the kind permission of one mind. I would never trust them with my soul again, and I fear that *that* is what I would risk by attempting it.”

“I understand, Elliot.” Isabella’s voice was a whisper.

She knew she could not push him any further on the matter.

“I am a curiosity, Isabella, and by marrying me, you have become one also. I should have realized that from the very start. I am sorry.”

“You need not apologize for you have done nothing wrong.”

“Have I not?” he said desolately.

“No, you have not.”

Isabella knew that Elliot was preparing to end the conversation again. With the flame low in the fire and the room in darkness once more, he rose to his feet.

“Goodnight, Isabella,” he said and waited for her to leave the room first.

“Goodnight, Elliot.”

Chapter 15

"My Dearest Esme,

How glad I am to receive your letters and how grateful for news from the world outside. I must admit, I am pleased that you are returned home from the Midlands. I know that you continued to write and that I do not see you anyway, but just knowing that the two of us are in the same county is a great comfort to me.

I do miss you terribly and have thought, more than once, that I ought to make an attempt to return to the little church so that I might at least see you for a few moments on Sundays. But I am sure that you will understand that, after the way my father behaved on the last occasion, I think it will be impossible for me to return there in the future.

I am growing used to the little services at the Coldwell Chapel with Elliot, Mr. Maguire, and the staff. Even the Minister is not quite so repellent to me as once he was, although I am still dubious of his spiritual guidance given what I know of him.

I had thought that it would be an awkward thing for Elliot to be in the chapel in daytime, but he seems to manage it very well. He puts a good deal of planning into every move he makes, and I cannot help thinking that it must be truly exhausting.

He is the first to enter the chapel every Sunday, and I am certain that he is there for some time before anybody else arrives. I know, of course, that it is so that he can arrange himself in such a way that the ruined side of his face is turned firmly to the wall. From where he sits, there is none who can see it, not in its entirety in any case.

Even I, whose seat is at his side, am spared the full extent of his disfigurement.

And then, when the service is over, Elliot is always the last to leave. In fact, I have never seen him leave yet; he simply remains in the chapel. I am sure that he stays there until he is assured that there is none other present, save for Crawford Maguire. I do not think that Crawford ever looks away from him or shows any sign of repulsion. I think it likely that he never has.

He is a man of such goodness, although I cannot claim much personal knowledge of him. I learned that he has been the most genuine of friends to the Duke, and it gives me comfort. When Elliot first became scarred, I believe that everybody turned from him apart from Kitty and Crawford, and I am saddened when I think of all that Elliot must have been through. And when I think that I have been a part of that, I am made ashamed.

I do not talk solely of my own part in perpetuating the myth of the monster, for it was already a well-formed tale when you and I were children; we could do no other than carry it forward. But, in truth, I do not think that I

will ever forgive myself for my reaction on the day we first met. To have somebody collapse to the floor in a dead faint at the very sight of your face must be an absolutely soul-destroying experience.

More than once, I have tried to imagine how I would feel myself in those circumstances, and it almost always reduces me to tears, so much so that I cannot think about it for long. If only I could break free from my own fear and prejudice and look upon him with ease, just as Crawford and Kitty do.

And I do not know if I will ever get the opportunity to try. Elliot is as determined that I should never see his face as I had been in the beginning. Everything is orchestrated, every move he makes, and I believe that it is all because of me.

I cannot help thinking that we are destined to spend the rest of our lives in darkness, in the near gloom of a single candle's glow.

I have still not been back to the tower and wonder if I ever shall. But there is an idea which touches my heart and will not let me be. And every time that I look out of my chamber window and see Elliot making his way back out of the woods, every time I realize that he has been back out to that desolate tower, the idea prods at me a little more.

I know now that Elliot's mother and sister died in that tower in a fire; Kitty has told me that much. Beyond that, I do not know any more of the circumstances and can only assume that Elliot's own disfigurement has

some connection.

When I saw that beautiful little portrait of his sister hanging in his chamber, I realized that he must have loved her very dearly.

I cannot get the picture of the little doll out of my mind, the one with the untouched porcelain face. It is clear to me now that the doll must have lain there these eighteen years, rooted to the spot where it had last been dropped by its owner.

The clothing is ragged, and it greatly needs cleaning, and I fear that if it is left there for many more years, it will disintegrate. It is dry in the tower, but still, it cannot be the best conditions in which to house something which ought to be a keepsake.

Esme, I have it in my mind to go out to the tower and rescue the little doll. I should like to make it a new gown and clean its face and its hair and have it returned to its former glory. And then, when it is done, I would like to give it to Elliot in the hopes that it will give him some comfort and peace.

Of course, I realize that I could be making the gravest error in doing so, and yet I am suffering the greatest notion that the Duke cannot move forward. It is as if he is trapped in a moment, not just a prisoner these seventeen years within the walls of his own mansion, but a prisoner within the walls of his own heart.

Even if I cannot look upon him properly, I should like to make some move that may help to ease his suffering.

I must think the thing through before I choose to do it, but I am almost certain already that I will try it. I will do something that will make a difference although, at this moment, I cannot tell if that difference will be for good or ill.

Wish me luck, my dear Esme.

With much love,

Isabella."

Chapter 16

By the time she had finished, the doll looked almost as good as new. Isabella had made her a new little gown and had been surprised at how easily the stains of smoke had come away when she had cleaned the creamy porcelain face.

As she worked, Isabella had been quite transported, remembering her love for her own dolls when she had been a girl of twelve. At that age, although one knew better, little dolls like that were almost real, very nearly friends. Especially for a young girl like Isabella who lived under the roof of a tyrant and spent a good deal of time on her own.

Isabella worked with the care that she would have lavished upon one her own dolls in her youth and, as she put together a very pretty little gown, her fingers working nimbly as she stitched, she almost forgot that the doll was not hers.

She made a bonnet to match the gown and tied it under the cold porcelain chin. When she had finished, Isabella laid the doll on her own bed and looked down at her. All in all, Isabella had done a very fine job of returning Lady Eleonora's doll back to her former glory.

As she stared down at the doll, Isabella began to grow a little afraid. Now the thing was done, there was no turning back. She had taken

the doll early that morning in the hopes that its absence would not be noticed. She knew that Elliot did not go out to the tower every day, and she had to hope that he had not been surprised by the doll's absence. She had to hope that he had not been out there.

But, of course, she knew she could wait no longer. The doll would have to be handed to him when she met up with Elliot that evening in the drawing room, and there was no other way around it.

If he had not been out to the tower that day, then he might go the next one, or the one after that. Isabella thought that the whole thing would work so much better if he did not suffer the shock of seeing that the doll had been taken.

Going out to the tower to retrieve the doll had been a curious experience. As she had walked along the path, she knew that her steps were getting slower and slower the nearer she got. She was putting off the inevitable, not wanting to set foot ever again inside that place.

However, when she finally arrived, when she finally pulled open the tatty wooden door, things were not quite as unsettling as she had remembered them.

Everything looked the same, but perhaps having a little understanding of what had happened there had removed some of the uncertainty, had stemmed the imagination just a little.

Still, when she made her way upstairs to retrieve the doll, Isabella did not waste any time. She scooped up the precious cargo and set off for home almost immediately.

Any fear she had of re-entering the tower had now been supplanted by the fear of Elliot's reaction.

Having eaten very little of her evening meal, Isabella finally made her way down to the drawing room. She was late by a few minutes, something which was most out of character. But just as she had dragged her feet on her way to the tower that morning, she was dragging her feet on the way to her husband.

"Isabella, I had thought you would not come," Elliot said when she walked into the room.

"I am a little nervous, Elliot," Isabella said truthfully.

"I hope you are not nervous of me? I had thought that you were perhaps not quite so uncomfortable in my company anymore."

"I am not at all uncomfortable in your company, Elliot," Isabella said and suddenly wished that the whole thing was done, finished, for good or bad. "Not in the slightest. But I have done something, and I do not know if I did right or wrong."

“You sound very worried, and I would not have you so. But please, do come in, Isabella. At least come and sit down and tell me what has happened.”

Isabella knew that the time had come and, instead of making her way in and sitting in the chair she ordinarily sat in, she walked right through the room and stood before him.

She looked at his face through the dim light but tried hard to simply concentrate on the untouched side. She could not have her own reactions to him clouding the evening. This was about something very different and making him feel uncomfortable about his appearance would make everything so much more complicated.

“Forgive me if I ought not to have done so, but I have twice been in the little tower that I found in the woodland. I know that you said that I am free to wander where I may, but I am not so sure that you had meant to extend that right as far as the tower.”

“Nothing has changed,” Elliot said in a quiet voice as he studied her. She knew that he could see she held something behind her back and already he was becoming unsettled. “I meant what I said; you may go wherever you choose.”

“Thank you,” Isabella said but knew that, despite his current

calmness, the thing was not over yet. “When I was there I saw a doll on the floor.” She heard him draw his breath in sharply. “And whilst I do not know the full facts, I realize that the doll must surely have belonged to your sister.”

“Yes.” His voice sounded husky, thick with emotion, and Isabella grew more nervous.

“I had the greatest concern that the doll would one day perish, its materials unable to withstand the conditions any longer. And so, I decided to make some repairs to her, to clean her and make her some new clothes.” Her voice trailed off as she saw his mouth gape open.

She knew at that moment that he realized that she held the doll behind her back, and he seemed for the entire world as if he would back away from her had he not been sitting in a chair.

“No,” he said finally, his voice hard and angry. “No. No.”

Isabella began to back away, the doll still behind her back. Her hands were shaking, and she knew there and then that she had done the wrong thing. She should never have interfered, even if she had thought to help him.

“Forgive me,” she said as she backed away through the darkness.

She did not want to turn around to make her exit for fear that he would get a glimpse of the doll he was so determined not to see.

“No,” he said again, and Isabella thought it was in response to her pleas for forgiveness.

Was he refusing to forgive her?

“Elliot, I am so sorry. I thought only to help, truly I did.” As she continued to back away, her heel caught the leg of the little table at the side of her armchair, and she lost her balance.

Isabella fell backward, landing hard, but thought at the last moment to pull the doll out in front of her. Had she landed on her, the porcelain face which had survived such destruction eighteen years before would have most certainly been cracked.

Finally, Elliot got his feet and hurried towards her. He made such haste that her eyes flew to his disfigurement, her imagination suddenly running as wild as it might have done when she and Esme were little girls. The monster was bearing down on her.

She began to slide back across the floor, her feet paddling to propel her backward in a bid to escape. And yet, despite her sudden fear, still she held the doll gently in one hand and out of harm’s way.

“Isabella. Isabella, stop. Stop moving,” Elliot said and stood stock still staring down at her. “I have not come across the room to hurt you; I have come to help you. I am not a monster!”

Isabella knew that she had thought exactly that. She knew what it was to have an angry man race across the room with the intent to hurt; a real monster, albeit that her father was fair of face.

“I am sorry,” she said, too shocked and fearful to even cry.

“Let me help you to your feet if you are not so afraid of me,” he said and held out a hand.

Isabella took the hand and no longer felt afraid. Instead, she felt ashamed. She had assumed the worst of him and had likened him, in those dreadful moments, to her father.

But she knew that *that* was not what Elliot had seen. He had seen the girl who was afraid of the ugly monster, the monster that was going to hurt her, and she could have cried for all the pain she had just caused.

“Thank you,” she said quietly as he pulled her to her feet with ease.

She stood before him not knowing what to do or say with the doll hanging limply down by her side. If only she had left it alone; if only she had realized that, had he wanted the doll kept safe, he would have

retrieved her years ago. If Elliot had wanted to keep his sister's doll as a memento, it would never have lain out in the cold, desolate tower for eighteen years.

Why could she not have seen it all at the time? Why could she not have let it lay there, let it be?

"Elliot, I do not know what to do now," she said, fighting hard against tears.

"No, neither do I," he said, and she felt as if a strong wall had just been built between them.

"I will return the doll to her original condition, as best I can, first thing in the morning. And I will take her back to the tower and leave her where I found her." Her throat was so tight it was painful to speak.

Elliot did not move or speak but stood there in front of her. His face seemed devoid of expression, and he did not, for once, seem to consider that he was standing looking at her face on. He made no move to hide himself or arrange things as he ordinarily did. He simply stood there.

Away from the fire and the lamps, Isabella could not see him very clearly, but he was clear enough. Instead of concentrating on the

ruination, instead of allowing her eyes to be drawn that way, she looked into his eyes.

It was too dark to see them as anything other than brown or black in the gloom, not the beautiful green that they were in lighter surroundings. He held her gaze firmly as soon as she looked at him; he did not look away, not even for a heartbeat.

They stood in silence for some moments, neither one of them looking elsewhere. The room was deathly quiet, and all that could be heard was the laboured breathing of them both.

Isabella could not help thinking that their breathing suggested exertion, physical exertion. But of course, there had been none; only emotional exertion.

She wished she knew what he felt as she stared at him. She wanted to know if he hated her for what she had done. She knew it would not help her to be in the dark in every sense, not knowing if he would ever forgive her, not knowing what would come next.

“I think we should part for the rest of the evening, Isabella.” When he finally spoke, she recognized his voice again. He was back.

“But Elliot.”

“No, I cannot think it will do us any good to remain here in this state.”

“I wish I could know if you would forgive me.”

“Let us not speak of this.”

“Never speak of it? Never allow me to apologize properly? Never allow me to explain why I did it?” Isabella could feel herself becoming frantic.

“Goodnight, Isabella,” Elliot said and finally broke their gaze.

“No, no. I will not say *goodnight*. I will not say goodnight and leave the room as I always do when you are no longer happy to speak. I do not want to go away until we have resolved it.”

“There is nothing to resolve.”

Isabella knew that he cast his eyes down for a moment, almost as if he was chancing a look at the doll.

“I am sorry, Elliot. I am truly sorry.”

“Goodnight, Isabella,” he said again.

He walked around her and out of the room without another word.

Isabella turned to watch him leave and then followed him, holding onto the door frame as she watched him walk away along the corridor towards the entrance hall.

Silently, she crept along behind him, thinking all the while that he might turn back at any moment, that he might come back to talk to her and settle it once and for all.

But as she saw his foot take the first of the stairs, Isabella knew that he was not coming back. She knew that he was going up to his own chamber, and she had no idea what would happen next.

Isabella left it more than ten minutes before she began to make her own way upstairs. She walked up slowly, feeling heavy in every sense.

When she walked into her room, the doll still hanging limply by her side, Isabella could not remember ever feeling more alone and isolated in her life. She knew she had come to rely on Elliot's company in the evenings, and she had the worst feeling that she would not be in his company again.

As she sat down on the bed, the doll in her lap as tears rolled down her cheeks, Isabella tortured herself with the idea that she would spend the rest of her life at Coldwell Hall without ever seeing Elliot. He was successful enough in keeping away from her in the daytime, in hiding from her. If he wished to hide from her in the evening too,

Isabella had no doubt that he could achieve it with ease.

She looked down at the doll in her lap and, in her misery, felt a rush of despair that almost saw her smash its porcelain face against the heavy wooden bedpost. She did not; she knew it was wrong.

This was not her doll; it was Lady Eleanor's. Isabella should never have removed it from its resting place and never should have changed it in anyway. If only she had not been so foolhardy; if only she had not assumed she knew what was for the best.

And if only she knew exactly what it was she felt for Elliot. So much had happened that evening, and she had felt so many emotions. She had felt nervousness, apprehension, and then fear, shame, and regret. Would she really have felt any of those things if she did not care for him?

And what if she never saw him again?

With a heavy heart and unrelenting tears, Isabella finally put herself to bed.

Chapter 17

“It has been almost seven days, Kitty,” Isabella said when she finally gave in and discussed the awful episode at length with her maid.

“Perhaps he just needs a little time, Your Grace.”

“No, I think that he shall never forgive me for what I have done.” Isabella shook her head wildly. “Never.”

“But you have done nothing so terrible.” Kitty gave her a warm smile. “In fact, I think what you did was very kind.”

“But you think me misguided in my kindness?”

“No, I do not. After all, you are left with very little to go on as far as my master’s personality is concerned. You see him but two hours a day and you could not possibly have been expected to have known how His Grace would have reacted.

“True. But I could have perhaps asked you first. You or Mr. Maguire. Who knows my husband better than the two of you?” Isabella sighed and felt the sadness of that truth; she did not know her own husband as well as others did. “Oh, if only I had spoken to you first, Kitty, then this would not have happened. I would have left the doll where it was

and kept away from that dreadful tower."

"Please, do not distress yourself, my dear." Kitty's tone and the lightest touch on Isabella's shoulder were more soothing than anything on earth to her.

"What is it about that awful place that draws one so? It is a place of such misery and feelings of awful foreboding. And yet Elliot takes himself there almost every day and I, like a fool, seek to follow in his footsteps when I should never have set foot inside those evil, blackened walls."

Isabella knew that the tower was not an intrinsically evil place; it was just the site of an awful tragedy. But still, she wished she had never set eyes on it; she wished she had never looked out of her chamber window and wondered at the turret she could see through the tall trees.

It was not, in the end, an enchanted place of mystery, but a place of the deepest sadness. Isabella was whipping her emotions up into a great state, and she needed somewhere to firmly plant her blame for it all. The tower seemed as good a place as any. Of course, the truth was that she largely blamed herself for her carelessness in proceeding with little or no information. What a foolish thing she had done.

"Kitty, tell me, what should I do now?"

“I wish I knew. If I did, I would tell you, my dear. I promise.”

“But what if Elliot never speaks to me again? He is so good at hiding himself away from the world that he easily hides away from me also. And that is without so great an upset between us previously. Now that this has happened, I am sure that the two of us could live out our lives here in this place without ever once seeing one another again.” As much as Isabella was unsure of her own feelings for Elliot, she knew she could not stand a life led in such a way.

It would be too isolated; too cruel.

“I am sure that could not possibly happen,” Kitty said as brightly as she could. “You will stumble upon one another before you know it; I am quite sure of that.”

“But I stumble upon him so rarely, and Coldwell Hall is so very large.”

“But surely not so large that you would never see each other.”

“Kitty, I have not met Crawford Maguire since that first meeting here, and he claims to keep rooms here. And, apart from you, there are many of the household servants whom I am sure I have seen only once. There are probably others I have not seen at all.” She began to feel panic rising. “How is it possible for a person to be as isolated as I

am in a house full of people?"

"Oh, please do not upset yourself so badly." Kitty patted her shoulder. "Would it help if you spoke to Mr. Maguire about it all? Perhaps he might have better answers for you. And he is in a better position to speak to the Duke on personal matters where I am not."

"But the two of you are close," Isabella objected.

"But he is still my master, and I the maid. Now that he is a grown man, I can no longer speak with him the way I did when he was a boy. But Crawford Maguire is able to speak freely with him, being a friend and an equal."

"And you have some contact with Crawford Maguire?" Isabella said hopefully.

"Yes, I have a good deal of contact with him. We have worked alongside one another all these years to keep the Duke well looked after. I can get a message to him and request a meeting for you."

"Would you really, Kitty?" Isabella felt a little spark of hope in her chest.

"Of course, I would, Your Grace." Kitty's image in the dressing table mirror smiled warmly at Isabella's reflection.

“Then I should be most grateful.” Isabella raised her arm and placed her hand on top of Kitty’s as it rested comfortingly on her shoulder. “Thank you, Kitty. I do not know how I would manage without you.”

Just the following day saw Crawford Maguire making his return to Coldwell Hall, and Isabella felt a twinge of nerves as she made her way to his study. She need not have feared the meeting, however, for the moment she was in his presence once again, Isabella felt as comfortable as she had the first time they had met.

“You’re Grace, how very nice to see you again.”

“Please, call me Isabella. I cannot bear to be called *Your Grace* any longer.” Isabella sighed with relief that Crawford Maguire was as easy company as she remembered.

“Oh dear, «he said with a wince.

“I am not complaining, Mr. Maguire, truly. I just wish I could hear my own name spoken aloud from time to time.” She shrugged.

“Surely Elliot calls you by your first name?” Crawford seemed momentarily confused.

“He does, of course, but I have not seen my husband for a week, and so I should like to hear my own name spoken. It might make me feel less alone, less isolated.”

“I am terribly sorry, Isabella. I knew, of course, that there was some problem, and I ought to have been aware of it as I spoke. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. I am grateful to you for coming out to see me today, really I am.”

“I should have been here more than I have been of late. You would have found me easily if I had been.”

“Mr. Maguire, I would not expect you to be here at all times. You have your own life, and you must lead it. And I have heard Elliot say as much. He would not have you tied to Coldwell Hall at the expense of your own future.”

“It is no hardship. And please, if I am to call you Isabella, you must call me Crawford.” He smiled and continued, «Forgive me, but Kitty has already furnished me with some of the details of the problem at hand.”

“Then you know the foolish mistake I made with Lady Eleanor’s doll, do you not?”

“I know about the doll, but I am bound to say that I do not think your actions foolish at all,” Crawford spoke in his customary open manner.

Isabella did not suspect for a moment that his sentiment was anything other than true. He was not trying to flatter her or ease the blow of her own foolishness.

“I wish I could share your optimism, but I have been almost entirely alone this last week for my efforts, and I do not know what to do about it. There would seem to be no way for me to take the whole thing back. Of course, I cannot, but I wish I could. I wish I could erase it.”

“I do not share that view. In truth, I am glad that you have made some move which will force Elliot to make some move of his own.”

“I am afraid I do not understand.”

“Elliot visits the tower every day of his life; or almost every day, at any rate. It has been eighteen years, and it is beyond the point of being a healthy pastime. He is no longer paying respects, but clinging on to his grief. It is as if he cannot let the grief go for fear of letting Eleanor and his mother go also. But they are gone, Isabella, they are gone.”

“True, but should he not be allowed to grieve as he sees fit? We are all different after all.”

“Yes, but this is not grieving in the normal way. This is a very determined grieving. It is the sort of grieving that is born of the guilt of having survived where others have perished. It is not so much sadness and loss anymore as it is a means by which Elliot might punish himself daily. And punish himself for nothing more than the crime of surviving.”

“Oh dear.” Isabella raised a hand to her throat involuntarily.

Crawford’s words made sense, and she wished she knew her husband as well as his friend did. She might have found a different way of going about things.

“By removing the doll from the tower, you have forced him to think about his loss again instead of concentrating solely on his own punishment. He has been forced to interrupt a pattern that has been repeated almost daily for many years. And I do not doubt that Elliot is uncomfortable with it all; he has relied on this pattern for so long that he must feel all at sea.”

“But that is terrible.”

“It is painful; I have no doubt. But I also have no doubt that it is

necessary. I do not think a change for the better in this situation can possibly come without pain. But I think it is fear also; the fear of letting go of old rituals if you will."

"So, you think this to be a good thing?" Isabella wondered if there was some hope.

"Yes, I do. Elliot is stuck, not only in the past but in the routine of every day. I had hoped that he would break many of those routines once he became married, but he has kept to them much as he did before."

"But he spends his evenings in my company. Two hours a day at least. Or he did, before all of this." She spread her hands helplessly.

"But his days are the same. He creeps about the place trying not to encounter his own staff, content only in my company, or the company of dear Kitty. And that has not changed in many years."

"I have only encountered him once in the daytime."

"Because he does not want you to see him by light; you must have realised that."

"Yes. And I know it is my fault."

“Why? Why is it your fault?”

“If I had not fainted that day in the chapel, I would not have made Elliot feel so conscious of his scars.” Isabella looked down at her hands.

“He was conscious already, and he has been hiding from his own staff for so long it was already a habit. And he had known that your reaction would not be favourable before the day had even arrived. Elliot was aware of the dangers of marrying a lady he had never met and who had never set eyes on him. But he could not get past your father on that issue, I am afraid. The Earl would not hear of it, stating that you were well prepared, and no meeting was necessary.”

“I cannot claim to be surprised by my father’s actions, sadly.” Isabella felt her cheeks flush.

She suddenly remembered that Elliot had told Crawford Maguire that her father had made an approach for a further financial settlement to be made. Although she had stridently asserted she would wish no money to be sent, still Isabella felt the shame of the connection as if she were as guilty of greed as her father.

“But really, nothing would have prepared you for the first meeting. It is just unfortunate that your first meeting was your wedding day. You would always have had a reaction of some sort to Elliot’s appearance;

you are human. It takes a while before you do not see it anymore."

"You do not see it?" Isabella asked awkwardly with reddening cheeks. "You do not see Elliot's scars?"

"No, I do not. But it has not always been so. I struggled with it in the beginning, but largely because I remembered just how he had looked before. I was forever expecting something different. But time passes, and I would be shocked now to see him suddenly returned to his former appearance. It is simply a matter of familiarity and nothing more." He shrugged his broad, vaguely stooped shoulders and smiled warmly.

He really was a very nice man and undoubtedly a good friend to Elliot. And perhaps he was becoming a good friend to Isabella also.

"Then you think I can grow used to it too?"

"I have no doubt. But for that to be achieved, two things must happen."

"And they are?"

"Firstly, Elliot must come out of the shadows, for how else are you to get used to his appearance?"

“And the second thing?”

“You must be prepared to look. If you do not look, you cannot become accustomed.”

“That is very true,” Isabella said although she already doubted her own fortitude in that regard.

“But it will take time and patience for you both.”

“And what about the doll? What if Elliot can never forgive me for what I have done? Surely then, everything we have discussed this morning would be out of the question.”

“Elliot will not stay in hiding for long. It is just his way of managing things; a way you must help him to let go of.”

“So, what should I do with the doll? I have it in my room and dare not make a move one way or the other for fear of making another grave mistake.”

“I cannot tell you what to do with the doll. I think this is something that Elliot must overcome, rather than you. You tried to help and, in the end, I think it will help. All I can provide by way of advice is to tell you to have patience. This will work itself out, I am sure. Whatever you choose to do with the doll will end up being the right

thing. The whole point is that you have thrown a pebble into the still waters of habit, and the ripples will continue to spread outwards now, regardless of what you do with the doll."

Chapter 18

For the two days which followed, Isabella's mood continued in an optimistic manner. Crawford's words had not only soothed, they had made perfect sense.

And, knowing Elliot as he undoubtedly did, Isabella knew that Crawford's words were as sure as anything she would ever hear in respect of Elliot.

The idea that she would come to look past Elliot's disfigurement was one which seemed feasible in one moment and impossible in the next. But Crawford had first-hand experience of that very thing, so she must trust his ideas in want of anything else to replace them.

Still, there had been no sign of Elliot. Every evening after the meal which she now always took in her own room, Isabella made her way downstairs to the drawing room in hopes of finding him there.

When she found the room empty, she would then make her way to the library in the hope that he would be sitting in the near-dark as he made ready to play his violin. But there had been no sign of him there either.

If Crawford were right, Elliot would come to his own conclusions

sooner or later, and she would see him again. And now that Crawford knew everything, might he not bring some kind and caring pressure to bear on his friend to look at things in a different light?

After another day with no sign of her husband, Isabella decided to once again make the journey through the woodland to the tower. She had decided to return the doll, not entirely for Elliot's sake, but because she was tired of seeing it in her room, reminding her of her mistake.

It was an unusually cool day, and Isabella wrapped a heavy woolen shawl around her shoulders before setting off for the tower. She tucked the doll into the folds of her shawl, lest she happened suddenly upon Elliot out in the grounds.

She did not want to have that same conversation again; she simply wanted to return the doll and have done with it; forget the whole thing.

Isabella hastened through the woods this time, not delaying her arrival by any means. She wanted to get it over with and return to the Hall. And when she approached the ruined door of the tower, she did not feel the same sense of apprehension. She knew what to expect, and it did not bother her as it had done.

Perhaps that was what Crawford had meant when he said it was

simply a matter of familiarity?

Isabella pulled open the door and headed immediately for the stairs. She hurried up them carefully and into the room above. The moment she set foot inside the smoke blackened room, she gasped in surprise.

Standing in the room, staring down at the place where the doll had once lain, was Elliot. He spun around in surprise, facing her square on for a moment before coming back to himself and turning to hide that side of his face.

“Forgive me; I had not known you were here, Elliot. I would not have come otherwise, and I did not mean to startle you, «she spoke in a flurry of nervous words.

“I think you were as startled as I was. There is no need to apologize, «he said sombrely, and she wondered quite how things now stood between them.

Was he still so quietly angry with her? Or had the anger passed, only to be transmuted into something else?

“I shall leave.”

“You came here for a reason, did you not?” He seemed suddenly interested in her reason for being there.

Isabella felt suddenly afraid. She did not want to remove the doll from the folds of her shawl in front of him for fear that the sight of it would engender the same reaction as the first time.

“I did. But I had not thought you would be here.” She turned to leave.

“No, wait. Please,” he said, and she turned around slowly.

“I do not wish to intrude upon your solitude. I never did,” Isabella said quietly.

“I should never have acted the way I did, «he said and looked at her intently with his head still tilted.

Isabella stood silently looking back, her relief at seeing him again greater than she could ever have expected. But still, she did not know what to say. She did not know what to do with the doll.

“I was taken by surprise that night, Isabella, «he went on when she had still not spoken.

“I know, and I am sorry for it, «she said truthfully.

“And I know that you acted with the best of intentions.” His voice was quiet and uncertain.

Isabella had only heard him speak in such a way rarely, and she knew he must be suffering. She wanted to make it all easier for him but still did not know how.

“But the best intentions are no substitute for firm knowledge. Of course, I had no way to secure such knowledge, but I know now that I should not have acted without it. And for that, I am sorry.”

“My sister played here almost every day as a child.” He began his tale so suddenly that Isabella’s mouth fell open just a little.

“Did she?” Isabella quickly recovered herself and smiled encouragingly.

“Ever since she had been a very little girl, she had loved this place.” He looked around him at the blackened walls. “She always thought it was a castle. Not a part of a castle, but the whole thing. I never could tell why it was she thought that.” He smiled to himself. “A little girl’s fancy, I suppose. I tried to tell her that the tower had been a lookout for a real castle that stood on this site hundreds of years ago, in the time of my ancestors, but she would not have it as true.” He laughed and shook his head. “She told me I must be wrong because *this* was the castle, and that was that.” He waved his arm vaguely around the place.

“It must have seemed magical to a young girl,” Isabella spoke with quiet care; she did not want to interrupt him.

“I would come here with her when she was little. Mama did not like her out on her own in case she came to injury somehow. If I did not come, Kitty would.” He stared off into the distance as he drew it all to memory. “Her nurse would never come down with her. She liked Eleanor to stay clean and tidy in the main grounds, not scampering through wild woodland.” He laughed almost to himself.

“My own nurse was very similar.” Isabella smiled at him, but he did not see her.

“Oh, and her governess, when Eleanor was old enough to have one, was much the same. But Eleanor would have spent all day every day here in this place. She would have taken her morning lessons in this room if her governess had allowed it.”

“But your sister still managed to spend a lot of her time here?”

“Yes. She had me, Kitty, and Mama wrapped around her little finger. Mama, in particular, would spend many hours out here. So long, in fact, that they would bring a picnic lunch with them some days.”

“That sounds idyllic.”

“It was a very different place then. Eleanor had persuaded me to carry all sorts of comforts over from the Hall.” He laughed and became distant again. “I remember carrying the ruined old armchair you see here.” He pointed at the chair. “It was in a very fine state of repair back then. And there was a chaise-longue and two more chairs downstairs, along with a little side table. I carried it all across bit by bit, whenever Eleanor decided upon some other scheme.”

“You must have been very close.”

“We were.” He smiled. “She was only five or six years old when I carried these things here. I was but fourteen years myself. And she was very precious to me. She was like a little doll herself.”

“No doubt she had the room beneath all set out so that she could host afternoon teas.” Isabella could imagine it all.

A little girl with her mother and an old teapot and cups as she poured nothing more fortifying than cold water out for her doll and her mama to drink. She had played such games herself when she had been a girl.

But when Isabella had been a girl of six, Lady Eleanor had already been dead some four years. Had she lived, she would have been an adult in comparison. The idea gave Isabella a little shiver. She was silently mourning the loss of a girl who would never grow up; would never become the woman of thirty years who ought to have been

there now, befriending her new sister-in-law.

The timing of it all was not lost on her. Neither was the fact that Elliot had suffered the disfigurement which had ruined her life when Isabella was just two years. It was a lifetime. She had known that already, of course, but something about imagining herself back then had put it all into some sort of cruel perspective. He had suffered for almost *her* entire lifetime.

“Yes, there was an old tea service. Well, bits and pieces.” He shrugged. “Just enough cups and saucers and a teapot, I think. And it was all still here as the years went on. Even as she began to grow up, Eleanora kept everything just as it was here.”

“And she still visited?”

“Every day.” He shook his head indulgently. “Every day. Although she had taken to coming here on her own more. Mama was less anxious about her coming to harm or having an accident.” He stopped suddenly and stared at the walls at what was obviously the evidence of that one, final accident. “She still thought this an enchanted place, a place she still thought of as an entire castle. But she didn’t have her tea parties anymore. She used to read her books on the chaise-longue downstairs, or sit in her armchair up here and gaze out of the thin windows.”

“It was a place of peace for her?”

“Yes, it was certainly that. And after my father died, I always thought she came here to think about him and to weep just a little in private. She was that sort of girl.”

“Did your father ever visit her here?”

“Not really. He might have popped his head in when he was out and about on the grounds. Nothing more than a cheery hello.”

“That was nice.”

“Yes, he knew it was Eleanor’s little domain, a place she shared with our mother, and he respected it.”

“How old was Eleanor when your father passed away?” Isabella felt as if they were somehow on more stable ground than they had been.

Elliot was becoming comfortable enough to talk about things he might never have said out loud.

“She was just eleven, and I was nineteen years. It hit her very hard indeed. I daresay it hit all three of us very hard. He was young to have passed, and it came as a shock.”

“You must have been a very close family.”

“We were. You know, I was never excited by the prospect of becoming Duke. At least not since I was old enough to realise that it would only come to pass when my father had died. I would have gladly never taken my title.”

“It is a painful gift, a title. Or, at least, it can be.” Isabella thought of her own family.

Would Anthony ever wish that his title would never come so that his father could live forever? She doubted it. Anthony was too much like their father to suffer the finer feelings or to even care about anyone besides himself. Their family, she thought miserably, had never been close.

How sad it was that Elliot, a man who had clearly been a part of such a close family, had lost them all within a year and found himself alone in the world by the age of twenty. The loneliest Duke in all of England. The thought of it made her want to cry.

Elliot’s retreat from the world was so much more complex than a disfigurement and the cruel taunts of others. There was nobody left to love and be loved by. His world had ended so suddenly.

“It should have occurred to me that Eleanor would one day try to do

something to stay warm in here." He resumed his tale with the same suddenness as he had begun it. "Her visits here were so much longer when she did not have our mother with her, or Kitty, coaxing her home again into the warmth of the Hall."

Isabella felt her mouth go dry. Had Eleanor started the fire that eventually took her life? What an awful thought.

"She was not the most practical of girls, and I should think she understood very little about the need for a fireplace when a fire is to be lit."

"You mean…?"

"It is the only explanation. There was a pile of kindling up here too," he said and kicked at some grey, dry twigs. Isabella could hardly believe what she was looking at. Sticks gathered up by the young girl who ought now to be a woman of thirty. "But the damage was so fierce downstairs that it is clear she chose it to be the site of her little fire in the end. No doubt she had decided to light a little fire on the stone floor and stay warm as she laid on her chaise-longue and read her book. A smaller imitation of our beloved mother in her own little drawing room."

"Oh no." Isabella felt suddenly so sad and horrified all at once. It was almost overwhelming.

“I can only think that the little fire got suddenly out of control, maybe catching light to the chaise-longue itself or one of the armchairs. There is nothing left but debris down there now, so I suppose I shall never know the absolute truth of it. But it is the only thing that makes sense. And, instead of running out of the tower, she ran up in a bid to escape the flames.” He paused and cleared his dry, hoarse throat. “I will never know if she was so afraid she just panicked and ran up the stairs, or if the fire had barred her way. The old door is blackened, but it was not burned completely, so I cannot say definitely.”

Isabella could think of nothing to say. Her eyes had welled with tears of pity, and she dared not blink or speak for fear they would fall.

“I knew nothing of it until I heard the shouts coming from the stables. I was in my study and looked out to see a horrible, thick black plume of smoke drifting towards the house from the woodland. I knew, of course, that it must surely be coming from the tower.”

Isabella stood as still as a statue hardly daring to listen to the rest.

“As I ran out through the grounds, one of the stable hands said he had seen the Duchess run past him. I realised then that she had seen the smoke and had run towards her daughter with that unspoken motherly instinct of protection. As I ran, I knew they were both in there, and I felt helpless as if I was running through wet sand to get

there, getting ever slower as I went."

He had turned his back to her, staring out of the slit of a window that the young Lady Eleanor had gazed out of so many times in her young life. Isabella felt the doll slip a little in its fold of woollen shawl and hastened to secure it.

"When I got here, the ground floor was aflame. The door was opened wide, and I knew my mother must surely have left it so as she tore in to rescue her child. I could do no other than run in through the flames." He held a protective arm up to the unmarked side of his face, and Isabella knew that he must surely have done exactly that on that awful day. "I could see that nothing would have survived the inferno on the ground floor and ran up the stairs. I had to feel my way, the air was so thick with smoke. And it was the same in here. No flames, nothing on fire, just thick, black smoke. I could see nothing at all, and it felt hot and thick in my lungs."

"Oh, Elliot." Finally, Isabella spoke.

"I dropped to my knees and searched, finding my mother first. I could not rouse her and knew she was not breathing. I felt so torn. I could not leave her there, but I could not stop looking for Eleanor either." He paused for several moments and was still staring out of the window and away from her. "And I found her just a few feet away. I did not stop to see if she was breathing; I just lifted her up and ran

blindly down the stairs. I left her on the ground in the care of the stable hands who had arrived just after me. I then ran back in for my mother. But as I ran through, my arm over my face, there came a great rumbling noise and something like a ball of flame, perhaps from the chaise-longue or the armchairs, I could not say, seemed to roll towards me. I felt it tearing into my flesh as if it were a knife rather than flames. I had never known such pain. I cried out, and I could hear shouts at the door. One of the stable hands reached in, and I felt him grasp my arm. I knew he meant to pull me free, but I could not leave my mother there alone. I tugged hard to free myself and set off for the stairs once more. The pain had all but gone in my determination, and I was back down with my mother in no time. The pathway to the door was clearer, the worst of the flames having burned themselves out."

Isabella knew the worst was to come.

"When I made my way outside, and the men took my mother from my arms, I knew she was dead. I knew that the smoke had filled her lungs and choked the life out of her. I had known it all along. I turned to my sister and could see Kitty on her knees by her side, her head resting on my sister's chest and her thin, bird-like frame wracked with sobs. I walked over, knowing all the while that my sister was gone also."

"I am so sorry." The image in her mind of Kitty, bent double with grief over the young girl, finally tipped Isabella's tears over, and they ran

down her face.

“I dropped also, looking down at my sister’s beautiful face. She was untouched by fire, the same as my mother. They had both been choked by the smoke, but the vicious flames had never reached them. It was a relief of sorts that they had not known the searing pain of burned flesh. But the fact they had suffocated was no real consolation. And, apart from the smoke and the dirt, my mother and sister looked as if they were unharmed. Like there was no true reason for them to be dead. I wanted to shake them both and shout at them until they woke up and started breathing again.”

Isabella took a step towards him, not knowing if she really should.

“And then Kitty, my dear Kitty, looked up at me, and her anguish turned to horror. Her eyes were glued to my face, and I knew then that the searing pain of the flames must have wrought some dreadful damage. But I did not care then, you see, for I wanted to lay down at the side of my mother and sister and stop breathing; to be dead also.”

Isabella took another step and laid a hand squarely in the middle of his back. He started a little at her touch but did not turn around.

“You came back with the doll, did you not? You came to return it to the very spot in which it had lain these eighteen years?” He spoke quietly, but she could hear the catch in his voice and knew that he

was crying his own tears.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“You need not do that. I won’t leave Eleanor’s doll here any longer. I won’t leave this place a shrine anymore. It is time to clear it up or knock it down; I do not know which.”

“And what should I do with the doll?”

“I will take it. I shall keep the doll in memory of my sister.” His voice was breaking. “And thank you for restoring it so carefully. I am truly grateful, even if I must have seemed anything but these last days.”

Chapter 19

For two more days following their meeting in the tower, Isabella had not seen Elliot anywhere. But she had not looked for him this time, knowing that he would send for her when he was ready.

Isabella had caught his strained, exhausted expression when he had finally turned back from the window to reveal the good side of his face once more. But it was enough for her to see how the retelling of it all had almost brought him to his knees; it had taken so great a toll on him.

And when he had reached out to take the doll from her, holding the lifeless thing for the first time in many years, Isabella could almost feel how overwhelmed he was.

When she had offered to walk back along the woodland pathway with him, she had not been at all surprised when he had declined. And she had not been hurt or offended either, knowing that she would have relished her privacy had she been in his place.

All in all, Isabella had begun to feel that an important corner had been turned. Elliot was in pain, she had no doubt of that, but perhaps Crawford had been right. Perhaps Elliot had needed to move along in the mode of his grieving.

And Isabella could not help thinking that if there was an end in sight to his fierce pain, that the two of them might really be able to concentrate their efforts on spending more time in each other's company. Perhaps even truly find that familiarity which would make her as comfortable to look at Elliot as Crawford and Kitty were.

On the second night without any sign of him, Isabella felt reasonably content. The worry she had suffered that she would never see Elliot again, that she would see out her life miserably alone in Coldwell Hall with an unseen husband, had all but vanished. They had come to a better understanding out there in the tower, and she knew it.

Isabella had made it clear that she had been working without knowledge because he had never given her such knowledge. And he had provided it almost immediately.

Isabella had settled down very quickly that night, turning off her small gas lamp early as she felt sleep begin to take her.

In no time at all, she was sleeping peacefully. That was until she heard a noise on the other side of her chamber door. She knew she had certainly heard something, for it had ripped her from her slumber and forced her to sit upright in her bed almost immediately she had heard it.

Surely there was somebody outside the room. Almost frozen to the spot, Isabella stared out through the darkness, willing her eyes to see. Would the door handle move slowly as the person on the other side of the door sought to gain entry at last?

As Isabella began to grow more conscious of her senses and surroundings, she tried to rationalize her fear away. After all, who could it be apart from one of the servants, Kitty, Crawford Maguire, or her husband? Surely an intruder would have been discovered before getting so deep into the house. And how would such an intruder ever make his way into the grounds in the first place? The hawthorns and leylandii were, she knew for certain, utterly impenetrable from the outside. Being designed to be just that, the perimeter was carefully maintained, she knew.

And so, it must be Kitty. But why would Kitty hover outside? Surely, she would just quietly make her way in.

Common sense told her it could not be Crawford Maguire either. There would be no sense in him coming to her room at that hour, and she knew in her heart that he did not hold any inappropriately romantic inclinations towards her, his friend's wife.

It had to be Elliot, there was no other explanation. But the idea suddenly made her feel unsettled. As hopeful as she had begun to feel for thoughts of her own future with Elliot, she was not yet ready for

him to appear in her own quarters, day or night.

Hardly breathing, Isabella listened for any sound outside but could hear none. She had been sitting rigid and unmoving for many minutes and knew she could not remain that way all night.

In the end, she re-lit her oil lamp, wincing at the sound of the match as she struck it and it flared. The room seemed suddenly huge, with all shadows banished and all clear space returned to her.

Isabella looked all around the room, her eyes finally alighting on a white rectangle on the dark wooden floorboards by the door.

It was a note, surely.

Isabella got out of her bed as quietly as she could and made her way across the room on tiptoes. She swooped down to pick it up and hurried back to her bed, the feeling that someone was still on the other side of the door not having left her entirely. She climbed back into bed to read the note by the light of the oil lamp.

“My Dear Isabella,

Please forgive the dreadful tension of these last days and understand that I would not have visited such tension upon you purposefully. But regardless of that, I think there is still an apology to be made to you, and I shall make

it now.

I had wanted to find a way to apologize and think that I have found a very fine way. When you awake, you will find my apology in the library waiting for you.

Thank you for your patience and your kindness in the tower. I shall never forget it.

Elliot."

Isabella read the note over and over again. It was short and to the point, but she appreciated its sentiments nonetheless. And he had signed it simply *Elliot*, with no other term of endearment. But what, in all honesty, ought he to have done?

They were married, yes, but they were still only just starting to get to know one another. Isabella would not have known quite how to sign such a missive herself and had a sudden image of Elliot leaning over the thing for hours as he tried to decide how to end it.

With such musings out of the way, Isabella began to wonder what could be waiting for her in the library. She knew that an apology could not be literally waiting for her there in the darkness, silently whiling away the hours until she awoke. It must be a gift of some sort, or perhaps even Elliot himself, suddenly wanting to apologize to her

in person.

In the end, Isabella's curiosity threatened to overwhelm her, and she was suddenly up and out of her bed once more. She lit a candle, thinking it to cast a more discreet glow for the midnight wanderer, and turned her oil lamp down once again.

With a shawl around her shoulders, Isabella crept to the door, opened it, and listened. There was nothing.

She continued along the corridor to the great staircase and stopped to listen again. The house was in complete silence. For a moment, she wondered if she ought to creep silently through the corridor to the other end of Coldwell Hall, to the room she knew was Elliot's own. But her nerve had deserted her before she had even decided to do it and, in the end, she began to silently descend the staircase.

In no time at all, Isabella was outside the library door. It was fully closed, which was most unusual.

In the daytime, the door always stood ajar, and at night, if Elliot was in there playing his violin, there was just enough of a gap through which to peer into the darkness within.

Isabella stood motionless and undecided for several minutes as she tried to strain her hearing for any tiny sound from within.

When she discerned no movement at all, she finally turned the handle and slowly pushed the door inward. She held the candle out before her for a moment as she stared into the room. Elliot was not sitting in his ordinary place by the fire, and the fire was not lit. The room was empty, surely.

Isabella made her way in further and realised that there was something in the library which had not been there before. With a gasp, she walked over to a large piano, its glossy wood glinting in the candlelight.

Was that it? Was the piano his apology? She looked all around it for another note; anything that would give some indication as to the new piano's sudden appearance.

But there was nothing.

She looked all around for anything else that might have changed in the library and could see nothing. So, the piano must be Elliot's apology.

With her curiosity almost assuaged, Isabella made her way silently back upstairs to her own room.

Chapter 20

The following morning, Isabella awoke early and with a feeling of anticipation, even excitement. She was keen to eat her breakfast and make her way back to the library to practice on her new piano. Assuming it really was for her, of course.

But Isabella knew it was. Elliot had remembered that she had learned to play but had let her skill drift when her pompous younger brother had commandeered the music room back at Upperton Hall.

When Kitty came in to help her dress, Isabella could not wait to tell her the news. And, for her part, Kitty seemed equally excited. There was a certain amount of satisfaction in Kitty's eyes, and Isabella knew that her dear maid was pleased to discover that her master and mistress were truly back on speaking terms.

"What a lovely surprise, Your Grace," Kitty said enthusiastically. "Have you played it yet?"

"No Kitty." Isabella laughed. "It was after midnight; I would have woken all of Coldwell Hall with my playing. Especially since I have not played for some years. I would have been quite dreadful. And I will be dreadful." She laughed again. "So you see, I really must practice or the Duke will think he has made a very grave mistake in

giving me such a gift."

"I am sure there is no hurry." Kitty smiled warmly as she turned Isabella's glossy brown hair into a pleat at the back of her head. I am sure that His Grace is not expecting miracles."

"I know. And I did tell him that I had not played for years, «she said thoughtfully. "But still, I should like to have a piece practiced and prepared for when he first hears me play."

"What a lovely thought." Kitty gave her a knowing smile.

"Why are you smiling like that, Kitty?"

"Oh, it just warms my heart to see how your feelings towards His Grace have changed."

"Well, I cannot say my feelings have changed exactly," Isabella said uncertainly as she wondered if they actually had.

"But, at first, you were afraid, which was quite natural. And then you were quietly getting on with things, almost as if you were resigned to some awful fate. But now I can see that you missed him when you did not see him for so many days and that you are relieved to be back on friendly terms. It is change, my dear, real change."

“Kitty, you really must not get your hopes up,” Isabella said cautiously.

“But that is what hopes are for.” Kitty laid the brush down on the dressing table and surveyed her handiwork.

“You really are the most exceptional lady’s maid. You must have missed your role these eighteen years.” Isabella wanted to change the subject, but she wanted to do it gently.

“Yes, I did miss it. I had thought to seek another position for a while. I was still young enough, and I wanted to build on the skills I had learned with the last Duchess.”

“Why did you stay?” Isabella thought of Elliot’s description of a devastated Kitty draped over the dead body of his sister.

“As His Grace began to improve in health, I thought he would have no need of a lady’s maid here. May God forgive me, but I never thought he would be married one day, not with his scarring.” Kitty looked ashamed.

“That is a very natural assumption, Kitty. You must not torture yourself over it.” Isabella wanted to be as much of a comfort to Kitty as Kitty had frequently been to her.

“I thought I would be here with little purpose, and I did not want to return to being a maid of all works really. I had thought I had made progress for myself.”

“But what happened?”

“When the Duke seemed to be getting on his feet a little, I decided I would start to look for another position. But His Grace went out one day, to see his doctor as I recall, and when he returned, I knew I could not leave him.”

“He told me about that day,” Isabella said quietly as she remembered how Elliot had been taunted by the laughs of cruel passers-by.

“He hid himself away for many days and, when Mr. Maguire told me how the Duke’s own driver did not help him, I knew the household staff might prove a problem for the Duke to manage alone.”

“But Crawford Maguire would have helped.”

“He did, and he still does.” She smiled warmly. “Mr. Maguire and I manage the appointment of staff between us. After Mr. Maguire dismissed the driver, several others of the staff looked for positions elsewhere. They were afraid to look upon the once-handsome face of their master, and I began to fear for His Grace ever seeing any of his staff again. I began to imagine them all going about their business,

careful not to cross their master's path. And it near broke my heart."

"Oh, Kitty. It is little wonder the Duke holds you in such high regard. You and Mr. Maguire kept things going."

"He has a good staff now. Not one of them would hide from him nor look away. They were hand-picked for their characters first and experience second."

"So, you stayed."

"I found purpose again, Your Grace. I was no longer a lady's maid, but my services in finding the right staff were needed, and that is what I chose to do." Kitty tidied the things on the dressing table as she spoke. "And now I am a lady's maid again, so I have the best of both worlds."

"I know that the Duke is very grateful to you both."

"He always had good manners and a fine character. Even when he was a naughty little boy, he still had a good heart." She stared off into the distance as if she could see the young Elliot Covington standing before her there and then. "He was cheekier than anything. He would tease and try to get a rise out of me for fun, but it was never done in a cruel way. I think he liked to make me and the rest of the staff laugh at his antics."

“He was a fun-loving child?”

“Oh yes, he was that. And adventurous too. He was forever having to be rescued from the tallest trees on the estate. He would climb up them with the skill and speed of a squirrel but could never seem to get down again.” She laughed, and her eyes looked glassy. “And he didn’t grow out of it until his sister was old enough to come out into the grounds. He became a real little gentleman then, looking out for her and worrying that she would fall or hurt herself in some way. He really took his responsibility for his sister to heart.”

“They strike me as having been a very nice, close family.”

“They were indeed. I have never known a family so close. That was why it was all so awful. His Grace seemed to lose them all at once. I know the old Duke had died months before, but His Grace was still grieving for that man when…” She faltered just a little. “When the Duchess and Lady Eleanor died too.”

“It is unthinkable.”

“It was a year before his own disfigurement even bothered His Grace. He was so overwhelmed by grief that his own suffering and scarring had not yet touched him. In truth, I think it was that first day out in the world which taught him how changed he really was. It brought it all home to him, and he retreated. And he has been here ever since.”

“Almost a prisoner,” Isabella said sadly.

“Yes, a prisoner. Some might think that he is a prisoner of his own making, but he is not. He is a prisoner of the circumstances that fell down upon him unwarranted.”

“Who would not have retreated in those circumstances, Kitty? I know I would have.”

“You understand, Your Grace, I can see that much.”

“And yet I cannot think it would be a good thing for the Duke to remain a prisoner forever.”

“No, he has missed out on so much. It would seem cruel and unfair for him to stay here for the rest of his life and him a man of just eight and thirty years.”

“But I wonder if he could ever be convinced to go out again? Perhaps he has been here for so long that he could not bear to leave?”

“That is very true, and I am sure that the length of time His Grace has kept to Coldwell Hall has made things worse. But perhaps now that he is married and his life is improving all the time, His Grace might be persuaded to make some move towards a different way of life? Maybe

even go out in society a little and get back a little of what he has lost all these years?"

"I wonder how such a thing is to be achieved," Isabella mused and felt suddenly interested in the challenge of it all.

"Little by little, I daresay. With loving kindness, I think His Grace could be persuaded that the world outside is not entirely filled with cruel and mocking people."

"Perhaps it is time to bring somebody from the outside here? That might be a very good first step. What do you think?" Isabella looked at Kitty, and it was clear to her immediately that the two women had just become partners in the thing.

Kitty was as keen to see changes at Coldwell as Isabella was, and they seemed, with their continued conversation, to be silently signing some sort of pact between them. They would work together to improve the Duke of Coldwell's life, and that was that.

"I think it a very good idea. But nothing sudden or shocking. We must be careful that His Grace is not suddenly confronted with a visitor he was not expecting. It is a thing he greatly fears, I believe."

"Quite so," Isabella said thoughtfully. "Ah, but he has already told me that I might invite my dear friend Esme Montague here for tea

anytime I choose." She raised her eyebrows.

"Now that is very hopeful. I had not realised." Kitty looked heartened.

"But I did take him to mean that he would not be there when Esme came. He said that I could arrange things through you."

"Then it seems likely His Grace would keep out of the way. But it's a start. He might see you and your guest from afar and start to wonder at his own solitude. This could be a very good thing."

"Indeed." Then Isabella's face clouded with worry.

"Your Grace?"

"*If* I can get Esme to come." Isabella felt the old concern. "I cannot help wondering if she would be too afraid."

"I see," Kitty said sadly.

"Kitty, when Esme and I were little girls, we heard the same silly stories as all the other children. That there was a monster living in a ruined mansion behind a tangle of hawthorns. I am ashamed to admit it, but it is true. And if we are to get anywhere, I must be open and honest with you."

“You need not be ashamed. And anyway, shame does not help to get things done.” Kitty was bright again. “And you and Miss Montague could not have escaped the tales. That is just the way of things. But do you think your friend would still be so affected? Even knowing how things have worked out for you here at Coldwell?”

“Perhaps not. And Esme is a hopeless romantic after all. Perhaps I could put it all to her in such terms that she could see how we are trying to help the Duke back into the world; to free him from his prison.”

“A romantic heart could surely not resist.”

“Indeed. And especially if I put it to Esme in such terms as she became part of things. As if she is helping him also, even without yet meeting him.” Isabella began to feel a little excitement.

She felt sure it had to do with having a purpose. And not just any purpose, but a very fine one indeed, one which would help another human being.

“That is a very good idea, Your Grace.” Kitty was equally enthused. “Shall you be writing to Miss Montague soon?”

“This very day,” Isabella said and laughed at the obvious prompting. “I think the sooner, the better.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“I shall practice on the piano for a while and hope to see the Duke this evening at some point. I can then revisit the idea of Esme coming for tea so that he is aware that I would seek such company. Then, before I retire tonight, I shall write a long and extraordinary letter to my dear Esme and lay it all out before her. I am certain that she will be only too keen to help when I give her all the facts.”

“You have a very busy day planned, Your Grace. You had better make sure you take a hearty amount of food for your breakfast.” Kitty nodded vigorously, and Isabella smiled.

Kitty meant what she said and, as always, Isabella found her mothering most fortifying. It was something that she had never really experienced. Her own mother had left that sort of thing entirely to first her nurse, and then the governess. Unfortunately for Isabella, neither one of those two women had an ounce of motherly instinct to spare.

Esme Montague had always cared for Isabella so well, but they were like sisters. Still, Isabella was always grateful for the sisterly relationship she would have otherwise missed out on and felt certain that Esme would be her very closest friend for the rest of her life.

As long as Isabella did not ruin things by forcing Esme to attend Coldwell Hall, the lair of the monster, against her will.

Isabella determined there and then that she would be entirely honest with Esme and let her know it was to be her choice. She would not force her or beg her.

She would not manipulate her kind nature and tender emotions. It had to be the truth and nothing else.

“Right.” Isabella rose to her feet so suddenly that Kitty jumped a little. “Breakfast it is.”

Chapter 21

“My Dearest Esme,

I have so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. I shall first update you with the news that Elliot and I are truly reconciled. After our emotional meeting in the tower, Elliot remained quiet, as I think I told you in my last letter. I did not see him for two days, but I was certain that I was forgiven.

I sneaked once more to his chamber in the daytime and was relieved to see the doll in his very own room. He had placed it on a narrow armchair which sits beneath the portrait of his beloved sister. Anyway, I did not linger long since I have a habit of being caught there, as you know.

I knew that Elliot was simply coming to terms with all the feelings he had likely raked up when he told me all in the tower in the woods. I knew we would soon be in each other’s company again. In fact, I had no doubt at all.

But the manner of our next exchange was really so surprising, Esme! In the middle of the night, I heard a noise outside my chamber door. When I set the lamp, I could see that I had received a note. It was from Elliot, no less. The note said that Elliot wished to apologize for the strained relations between us and that his apology was in the library.

Well, you can imagine my surprise when I sneaked through the darkness and found a brand-new piano awaiting me. I could hardly believe it, so much so that I wondered if I had not made a mistake of some kind.

But no, the piano was mine. When I hurried down to the library this morning, I knew it had to be what Elliot had meant.

As usual, Elliot was nowhere to be seen. I do so wonder how it is he fills his days, especially since dear Crawford Maguire spends so much less time at Coldwell Hall these days.

But I must admit to being grateful for my solitude today, for it gave me an opportunity to practice my new piano in private. Oh, and privacy was certainly needed, I can assure you.

My playing was truly awful at first. It was the playing of a child who is struggling with their lessons. And when I opened the beautiful velvet-covered piano stool to find new sheet music inside, I realised just how much I had forgotten.

I struggled to remember how to read the musical notes, and it took me all morning to recover my memory of that skill. All the while stumbling over the keys and striking wrong notes in every bar.

In the end, I settled upon a piece by Haydn. It was one I remembered from

much practice in my youth, and the sheet music I found in the piano seat was nicely printed and wonderfully clear.

I spent the rest of the day in determined practice of that same piece, over and over. I remembered how Elliot told me how he used to play for his mother and what a wonderfully appreciative audience she was for him.

And I must say that I fell to imagining myself playing the piece flawlessly whilst Elliot sat by the fire in the near darkness of the library as I was bathed in the light of the silver candelabra. I have already placed one upon the piano so I might play in the evening.

Of course, it was at that point in my imagination that I struck another wrong note and stopped playing altogether. Realizing I could only truly play well in my own imagination, I wondered if I would ever feel comfortable playing the piano for my husband. After all, he has now twice played the violin in my presence, and I think I ought to return such a favour. Oh, but is it any true favour when a person is not so blessed with musical prowess?

But then I remembered something that Elliot once said to me when we talked about learning to play an instrument, specifically me learning to play the violin. I told him that I would never play as well as he does, and Elliot asked me if that really mattered.

He said that the joy was in playing music for music's sake, not the good

opinion of another. I had not really thought about it much at the time, but the idea came at me with full force as I sat there in the silence and solitude of the library.

I knew then that he was right. Music is supposed to be enjoyed; it is not an accomplishment, as my own mother always had it. It is not a simple tool to impress others and make you more appealing a prospect for marriage. It is music, and that is that.

After that, I played without the same concerns. I did not try to imagine myself playing flawlessly for my husband or anybody else. Instead, I watched as my fingers danced across the keys, and I listened to every note. The melody was wonderful. Not flawless, but really and truly wonderful. I cannot say that I have ever played so well or enjoyed playing so much.

There, you will think me quite mad now; I have no doubt.

This evening after dinner, which I still take in my room for fear of loneliness at the dinner table, I returned to the library. When I made my way in, I could see no sign of Elliot. I had thought he would be there and was disappointed that he was not.

So, I lit the candles in the candelabra to see if I could really play by that light alone. It was wonderful; the glow of the candles showered light over the keys, and I settled down to play the Haydn piece once more.

Again, I had let go of the self-conscious playing concerned only with the judgement of others and instead played from the heart.

Imagine my surprise when, almost halfway through, I heard the beautiful sound of violin accompaniment. Yes, Elliot had come silently into the room with his violin and gently joined in to play the piece with me.

It was as if we were in perfect synchronicity. We played it as one person almost, I am sure of it. At first, I felt the old pressure returning and almost lost the melody at one point to my nerves at the performance. And then I remembered Elliot's words once again.

Does it matter?

And those words, long ago spoken, lifted my doubt and let me play again with joy in my heart. And Elliot most certainly played from his heart too, for it was the most wonderful sound.

When we had finished the piece, Elliot came into the room and took his customary seat by the fire. He had stood behind me throughout the piece, and I had not felt his presence until he moved away. It was as if I noticed the loss of him more, much as I have done these last days of our estrangement.

"You played that beautifully, «he began to speak as soon as he had settled himself.

“Thank you,” I replied. “And thank you for this wonderful gift. I had never expected such a thing.”

“I really am very sorry for all that has passed between us these last days. And all that has not passed between us. I have grown too used to my own absence as a way of managing my world, and I think it is a habit I ought to break.”

“Elliot, I have understood every moment of these last days, and I do not wish you to make any apology at all.” And then I went on, «But I should like to keep the piano nonetheless.” At which point Elliot roared with laughter.

His laughter, when entirely unguarded, is a tremendous sound. It is deep and loud and has a reverberation that I can often feel deep inside the walls of my chest. But it is like a roar; a lion’s roar to begin with.

As comforting as I find that laugh, I cannot help thinking that it would have made me afraid in the beginning, back when I still thought of the Duke of Coldwell as a mythical, dreadful monster.

“To hear you play has given me too much pleasure to allow me to return the piano. And so, it is safe.” He was still amused, I could tell.

Just a week before, I never thought that I would hear Elliot laugh in my

presence again. I never thought he would forgive me for moving the doll and disrupting what I now know had come to be something of a shrine to his lost family.

But to hear him this evening laughing once more has given me more relief than I could have imagined.

And the evening carried on in laughter too. Elliot begged that I would open the piano seat and take out another piece of the sheet music so that we might play again. I immediately told him that I had been practicing the Haydn piece all day and would only be able to stumble my way over any new piece that I attempted without first practicing.

"That does not matter, «he said, and I was reminded again of his words.

The words gave me courage, and I hurriedly opened the seat and searched for another piece. I chose Beethoven this time; a piece I have heard many times but rarely played. But I felt encouraged, just as the young Elliot must have done when his mother had listened with kind appreciation.

By the time I had set up my sheet music on the stand, Elliot had already made his way to stand behind me again.

I did not turn, knowing how uncomfortable my direct gaze makes him, even in the darkness. Instead, I just began to play. And yes, I did stumble over a good deal of it, especially the more complicated parts, which I

simplified in a way that would have made Beethoven himself weep.

And yet I enjoyed it immensely, and it was a joy to hear the violin played so beautifully behind me. I had stopped several times along the way as I peered at the music and tried to get it right. And each time I stopped, Elliot stopped also. At one point, I began to laugh at my own ineptitude and could hear Elliot laughing too. But it was not unkind at all. We were both amused, and the whole thing was so very lighthearted. I cannot think that I have enjoyed myself this much nor laughed so much since I was parted from you, my dear Esme.

In the end, we stayed in the library until almost midnight. We have never stayed in each other's company for more than two hours before, and I could hardly believe that more than four hours had passed so quickly.

Elliot walked me to the bottom of the staircase as he has done before, and bid me goodnight before heading back through the entrance hall. I cannot say where he was going. Perhaps he simply wanted something from the kitchen and would make his own way up the stairs afterwards.

And so it is that I am still awake past one o'clock in the morning as I write this letter to you. You might wonder why I have chosen to stay up when I might finish it in the morning, but I have something to ask you and wanted this letter to go out first thing tomorrow.

My dear Esme, I should like to invite you here to Coldwell Hall for

afternoon tea. It does not matter which day and so, if you care to accept, you may choose the day and let me know it in your letter.

Elliot has made it clear that I may receive any guest I wish and, of course, I should only wish to see you.

But I would not like you to feel you must come because I know well that you must feel a certain amount of trepidation at the idea of coming to the place about which we told so many terrifying stories in our younger days.

If it would put your mind at rest at all, Elliot would not be joining us. We would have privacy to talk, and you would not be meeting him at all. We could wander the immense grounds, and I could show you around Coldwell Hall. You of all people would be in awe at the enormity of the ballroom. A ballroom that has lain silent and empty for almost two decades.

I should so like to see you, especially when I once believed that we would never meet again. But where my own father sought to divide us, my husband would seek to do no such thing, and I would hope you may take heart from such a sentiment.

And yet I have another reason for inviting you. I have been scheming with dear Kitty to find some way of returning my husband to the world.

I believe I have told you in one of my previous letters the dreadful tale of the final outing which forced Elliot to take refuge in his own home to the

point of making himself a prisoner here. Well, Kitty and I have plans to help Elliot live a very different sort of life. Simply having a visitor here in his home, a place where visitors have not entered for many years, would be a tremendous step. Even though Elliot himself would not be greeting you, he would know he has a visitor here, and perhaps it will help him to expand.

There is more that I would wish to do to help him, and many ideas that I think you could provide, just as you always did when the two of us were together. But I shall not tell you anymore, nor seek to tug at your heartstrings. I will not play upon your considerable sympathies in hopes of enlisting your help. You must do whatever is right for you and know that I shall not blame you if you would sooner not come here to Coldwell Hall.

Regardless of your choice, I should still like to hear from you. I very much enjoy your lengthy letters with all the news from your world. You must not think that I shall stop writing if you choose not to come for tea, for I shall never stop writing to you, my dear friend.

In the meantime, I shall continue to practice the piano and find interesting things to tell you about when I next write.

Until then, take very good care of yourself.

With much love,
Isabella."

Chapter 22

“How could I not come?” Esme said excitedly when the two women embraced not three days later.

Esme had responded to Isabella’s letter by return of post. Isabella could hardly believe that she had a response by the afternoon of the day her letter had been sent, and she had laughed heartily to see how hastily the response had been written.

Esme had clearly been so keen to get word to her friend that she had hurried over her writing, and the paper was liberally splashed with ink. There were smudges everywhere, and Isabella could only imagine what sort of state Esme’s frilly white sleeve cuffs must be in.

“My Dear Isabella,

I shall come on Friday for afternoon tea. But I shall come at midday, so we have several hours together.

In truth, I am so excited that I would have come to you tomorrow, but I realise that you will have much to plan, and so I must be patient, must I not? But still, I wish it was already Friday now, and that we two were together again.

Anyway, I shall keep this short for I wish to make this afternoon's post.

With much love,

Esme."

The hastily scribbled letter was something that Isabella knew she would keep safe for the rest of her life.

When she had first opened it and read its contents, tears flowed freely down her cheeks. Isabella was touched, relieved, excited, and every wonderful emotion it was possible to have. She had missed Esme so much and could hardly believe they would soon be reunited.

But she was also relieved that Esme had not turned away from her, afraid to enter Coldwell Hall and come face to face with the monster. Of course, Isabella had known all along how important it was for her to have her dearest friend accept her husband, even just the idea of him. And it had been that which had stopped her from inviting Esme to Coldwell sooner.

Now that *that* particular obstacle had been brushed aside, Isabella knew that Esme would throw herself into the efforts to have the Duke of Coldwell rejoin the world.

"I should never have doubted you; I know that now. But we were both

so afraid of the Duke, or at least the idea of him when my father first said I must marry him. And I would not have blamed you if you had felt a little afraid."

"If I am honest, my overriding feeling when I received your letter was one of burning curiosity." Esme was smiling, and her eyes gave away her excitement. "And, of course, I could not wait to see you again."

The two women embraced for the fourth time, and Isabella felt as light as a feather.

"Well, what would you like to do first? A tour of the house, or the grounds, or would you prefer to wait until we have taken tea?"

"Oh, the house please," Esme said excitedly.

"Then take my arm, and I will guide you."

As they walked through the corridors and rooms of the ground floor, Isabella felt proud to be showing Esme around the place that was now her home.

"Good heavens! Look at him!" Esme almost ran through the entrance hall to where the great inanimate horse, with its rider made of armour, stood. "One could almost believe that there is a real knight inside that armour. If he moved, I would not be at all surprised."

“Elliot’s father always told him that it was real.” She smiled. “And told him many tales of lots of adventures the knight encountered in the world.”

“How wonderful.” Esme was enthused and still staring up at the grand sight. “And this entrance is almost the size of half my father’s entire house. Really, I never imagined that Coldwell would be so large. I suppose that is because it cannot be seen from the outside, and so one is left guessing.”

“I still lose my way from time to time.” Isabella laughed. “Let me show you the library.” Isabella was keen to show off her new piano.

“I say, what a lovely piano. Your husband has found the very best, has he not?”

“I think so. I could not have been more pleased, and I am playing it every day and in the evenings too. I have improved greatly in these last few days.”

“And does Elliot still join you in here? Does he still accompany you on his violin as he did on the night you wrote to me?”

“Every night. I come down straight after dinner and light the candles.” She pointed vaguely to the candelabra. “And I begin to play. Within a

matter of minutes, Elliot joins me. It has become quite a ritual of ours."

"So, you have not had your two hours per evening in the drawing room?"

"No, we seem to have gravitated quite naturally towards the library. And we have not yet retired before midnight since we have been playing music."

"Oh, that sounds so romantic."

"Romantic?" Isabella said and wondered if it really was.

She had to admit, she looked forward to the evenings all day and could not wait to have her evening meal done with so that she could return to the library. The library seemed a very different place in the evening. It was nice in the daytime as she played but felt very different in the evening when she shared the space with Elliot.

"Yes. It sounds that way to me. But do you still take your meals alone?"

"Yes, I do. I come down to the breakfast room in the mornings, and I take afternoon tea in the drawing room. But in the evening, I take my meal in my own room. The dining room here is so large, and I must

admit that to eat there alone makes me feel sad. Well, isolated and lonely, I suppose."

"But you do not take any of your meals with the Duke?"

"No. I suppose it is simply an issue of lighting. Even here in the library at night, the only real light is cast over the piano. If Elliot takes his seat by the fire, I can just make out his outline. And if we are playing, he tends to stand behind me where I sit at the piano."

"So, you do not routinely see his face?"

"No, he still hides it from me. He has a very practiced way of moving about, and even when he walks me to the foot of the stairs at the end of the evening, he always stands in a way that I can only see the handsome side of his face."

"So, he is handsome, then?" Esme said a little excitedly.

"Oh yes, he is very handsome,"Isabella said cautiously. "Older than us, Esme, but he certainly still looks young. His hair is a nice ashen brown, and his eyes are such a wonderful shade of green."

"So, you would be able to look upon his face fully, now that you have come to know him better? Now that you have come to care for him?"

“I do not know,” Isabella said and felt ashamed. “I cannot say for certain since I have only ever really looked upon him twice. Once on our wedding day and once, albeit briefly, when our paths crossed in the woodland.”

“But if you are keen to take him out into the world, to free him from his prison as you put it, would it not be best to show him that you of all people can look at him with ease? That would be the sensible first step, would it not?”

“Oh yes, of course. You have it exactly. I knew you would be able to help me, Esme.” Isabella smiled. “I should make that the first part of my plan.”

“Indeed. But I cannot think it will be a simple thing if the Duke is intent and well-practiced in hiding his face from you. From your letters, it would seem he goes to a lot of trouble to stay in the shadows. You will have to find some way to draw him out.”

“Yes, I shall.” Isabella chewed at her bottom lip thoughtfully. “I shall start this very evening and see how I get on. And perhaps Kitty will have some advice for me on how it is to be achieved. After all, Elliot does not choose to hide his face from either Kitty or Crawford Maguire. He must be more comfortable with them,” she ended a little sadly.

“Yes, but only because he has known them for a lot longer. He will become comfortable with you also once you come to know each other better. You have made great progress already, have you not? He is already choosing to spend more time in your company in the evenings. That must surely count for something.”

“I suppose it must, especially after the dreadful incident with the doll. I never thought that I would see him again. I daresay it sounds silly, but I had thought that Elliot would easily hide out from me in this great mansion for the rest of our lives.”

“Oh, my dear Isabella,” Esme said and reached out to take her hand. “You really do care for him, do you not?”

“Yes, I do care for him. But I do not yet know if it is because I should otherwise be so lonely here. I have found it very difficult to get to the bottom of my own feelings for him without the memory of that first day in the chapel coming back to haunt me. I know that he is a good man, a man to whom I find myself attracted on account of his character alone. But I do not yet trust myself that I could look upon him fully and feel the same way. I do not yet know if I am a person of character, or if I am as shallow as so many others are.”

“But you did not care for the idea that you would live without him if he hid away,” Esme said rationally.

“But was that because I missed him or because I missed company, any company?”

“I suppose, in the end, that is only something you can answer yourself.”

“And yet I cannot seem to answer it.”

“It strikes me that the business with the doll was a crisis point between you. But perhaps it was not crisis enough for you to be able to decide your real feelings for the Duke. Perhaps another matter will present itself in time, one which will test you properly, one in which you will know the feelings of your own heart without a doubt.”

“But what if such a crisis never comes? And should I not be *afraid* of crises?”

“They are not always for the worse, are they? Just think, a great crisis was brought on when you removed the doll from the tower. And now you and the Duke spend longer in each other’s company and have come to share your joy of music. If you had not taken the doll and the crisis had not been created, you might still be enjoying no more than two hours in the evening in the drawing room. So, you see, sometimes a crisis is something which simply moves us from one point in time to the next. It is a catalyst that can often put us on the right path.”

“You do have such a wonderfully clever way of looking at things, Esme,” Isabella said in quiet awe. “But really, what if a crisis of the nature you describe never comes? Am I to simply spend the rest of my life wondering?”

“No, you then take matters into your own hands,” Esme said with a confident nod. “And you are taking matters into your own hands already, are you not? You have determined to help your husband back to the world outside, and you have already determined that you must grow used to his appearance before you can expect others to do the same. Given time, once you find yourself able to look upon the Duke, even to forget what you see before you as Kitty and Mr. Maguire seem to have done, then I think you will find it very much easier to explore your own feelings. Away from the fear of your own reaction, the fear of hurting his feelings, I think you will come to know your own heart very simply.”

“So, I am to await a crisis but, in the meantime, I am to work at spending time with my husband and looking upon his face. Well, I cannot tell you how helpful you have been to me today, Esme. You always find the details that I seem to struggle to discover.”

“Sometimes you just need to say it all out loud. I think when you talk about things, solutions present themselves. When you just think about them, the only things that present themselves are further problems.” Esme chuckled.

“Oh, how I have missed you.”

“And I have missed you.” They embraced again. “And now, do take me outside so I can have a look at the wonderful little walled gardens you were telling me about. And the roses, I should like to see the roses.”

“Yes, of course.” Once again, Isabella took Esme’s arm and guided her out through the main entrance and into the grounds. “There are one or two walled gardens that are a real treat. I often sit in them to read and find that I have perfect privacy if I wish for it.

“Are the walled gardens near the woodland?” Esme said with some trepidation when she realised that Isabella was turning her towards the back of the estate.

“They are on the way to the woodland, but they are not too close.” Isabella turned to look at her. “Esme, are you alright? Has something upset you?”

“You will think me silly, Isabella, but I must admit that I am a little afraid of the tower. I would go anywhere with you, my dear, except there. I do not think I could manage it. It is all too sad.”

“No, of course.” Isabella gripped her hands tightly. “No, I should not

walk you through to the tower. It is such a sad place, so very tragic. No, our time together here must always be filled with happiness and laughter. There is enough sadness, and there is more than enough room for it without it encroaching upon our time."

"How kind of you not to be angry with me," Esme said with a smile.

"Not at all. If I had been better informed about the tower before I set off myself, I should never have gone to that place. And now that the doll is returned, I cannot imagine that I would ever return either."

"I must admit myself relieved to have this particular conversation out of the way. It was the only thing that had worried me in all of this."

"Even more than happening upon my husband, coming face-to-face with the monster?" Isabella asked quietly.

"But the monster does not exist anymore," Esme said with a laugh. "And from the moment I received your first letter, my dear, I knew that the monster had never truly existed in the first place. I am not afraid to meet the Duke of Coldwell, Isabella. In fact, I should very much like to meet the man who married my finest friend on this earth. After all, we always said that no husbands could separate us. Would it not be simpler in the end if I could come to know the Duke also, even make a friend of him?"

“You really are so very brave, Esme. And your kindness is very much in danger of reducing me to tears,” Isabella said and hurriedly dabbed at the corner of her eye. “But do you really think that you would not be afraid to meet him?”

“No, not at all.” Esme seemed quietly confident, and Isabella knew that her friend was not simply putting on a brave front.

She meant every word; that much was clear. It seemed to Isabella at that moment that Esme had come to terms with the silly tales of the monster in his castle much sooner than she herself had done. Perhaps, with Esme’s example, Isabella would soon come to do the same. And perhaps, with Esme’s help, it might be easier than she thought.

“And if you would like to put me forward as one of the first people to meet your husband when he begins to come out into the world again, you may do so. I would be very glad to meet the Duke, either here at Coldwell Hall or in my own drawing room for afternoon tea. You must let me know when he is ready because the moment he is, I shall be ready also.”

“Oh, Esme, how glad I am that I finally found the courage to invite you here. I cannot tell you what this means to me. Not just the help you have given me today, but the kindness you have shown towards a man you have yet to meet. You are a lesson to us all, Esme Montague, and a lesson for the good.”

“What a lovely thing to say,” Esme said in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone. “Now then, let me see these walled gardens before it is time for tea.”

Chapter 23

Isabella had waited several days for the opportunity to happen upon her husband in daylight. She knew that he must, at some point, make his way to the little tower in the woodlands once again. It was his habit, and she could not imagine him breaking it very easily, even though he had said it was time to let it be, or knock it down.

Isabella had hovered in her own chamber day after day so that she might have the best view of the little pathway into the woods. She sat in her window hour after hour, hardly daring to let her attention wander in case she missed him.

More than once, she had peered back into the room and then hurriedly turned back to look out of the window, wondering if Elliot had managed to evade her notice at the moment her concentration had lapsed.

She had seen him every evening in the library, without fail, but had never quite found the courage to ask him if he had visited the tower lately or if he intended to. In truth, she still did not dare ask him what it was that he did with his days and where he spent his time since she never accidentally found herself in his company.

In the end, she had simply had to rely on a steady observation of the

only place she had ever seen him apart from the drawing room and the library.

And, when she finally saw him slowly walking towards the woodland from her window, Isabella exclaimed loudly in excitement.

She hastily gathered up the shawl that she had left ready and waiting for just such an opportunity, and tore out of the room and down the stairs.

She was relieved not to have encountered any of the servants along the way, lest they make any inquiry and hinder her progress. By the time she had reached the woodland itself, Isabella was already out of breath from her speedy exertions.

She walked so quickly she was almost running in a bid to catch up with him, although he seemed already to be out of sight. He would undoubtedly already be in the tower by the time she reached it, and she knew that she would have to, once more, enter that building whether she wanted to or not.

And, sure enough, when she reached the tower, she could see that the door was ajar. Elliot was already inside.

She peered in and knew instantly that he was up on the next floor, standing in the room where his mother and sister had perished

eighteen years before.

“Elliot?” she called out softly so as not to startle him. “Elliot, are you in here?”

For a moment, there was silence. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the floor above.

“Isabella?” he called down quizzically. “Isabella, is that you?”

“It is, Elliot,” she called gently. “May I come up? May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Well… Yes, of course.” She winced as she heard the uncertainty in his voice.

Isabella hurriedly made her way inside and up the stairs before Elliot had a chance to change his mind. But still, she gave him opportunity enough to arrange his position, as he always did. As much as she wanted to make looking upon him normal, she did not want to charge into it, acting boorishly and in a manner that would see him turning away from her again.

“Forgive me, Elliot, I saw you from afar making your way into the woods, and I thought to join you. I hope that you do not mind.”

“No, not at all,” he said, but she did not think he sounded entirely convincing.

“Do you walk a great deal around the estate, Elliot?” Isabella could feel her conversation was a little stunted, almost as if they had not known each other for long, or were meeting for the first time.

“Yes, I try to walk the perimeter of the estate every week. It is a vast area to cover, but I usually manage it. I suppose I spend a good deal of my time out of doors.”

“But I never see you anywhere, Elliot,” she said quietly, feeling a little awkward.

“No, I suppose not. But I am more out and about on the further reaches of the estate, rather than the walled gardens and lawns and what have you. The whole estate is many miles across.”

“Yes, I suppose so. But please, do you keep out of the house and away from the gardens to keep away from me?”

“No, not at all,” he answered a little too quickly for her liking.

“Because if you do, there really is no need.” Even as she spoke, Isabella could see him conscious at every moment that she should not see his face.

“I suppose the truth of it, Isabella, is that I am a good deal more comfortable conversing in the evening. Truly, it is nothing that you have done, and there is nothing at all for you to worry about. I am just more comfortable that way, and that is all.” He shrugged and tried to appear at ease when it was clear he was not.

Moving infinitesimally, Isabella tried to work her way through the room so that she might be face-to-face with him. But every time she took the tiniest of steps, Elliot countered with one of his own, leaving them in the same position as before.

“But do you not feel lonely in the daytime?” she tried again.

“I do not know. Perhaps I am just used to my own company, Isabella.” He peered down at the floor for a moment. “Do you feel lonely in the daytime?”

“Yes, sometimes I do,” Isabella spoke quietly and studied what she could see of his face.

She had never seen a face more handsome than his and wished that the other side was equally as handsome. If only fate had not been so unkind; and if only she did not have to test herself in such a way.

“But your afternoon tea with Miss Montague went well, did it not?

And you may invite her here to Coldwell Hall as much as you choose."

"I thank you, Elliot. And it really was wonderful to see Esme again; I should like her to be a regular visitor if you allow it."

"Of course." He seemed relieved for a moment as if the pressure to truly answer her had been lifted.

"But it would be nice if Esme could meet my husband also." Isabella knew that her voice trembled just a little.

"Oh… I…" He turned away from her, walking towards the window behind the blackened little armchair his sister had once sat in.

"I do not wish to cause you concern, Elliot. And I know that my interference has not been welcome in the past, and I am afraid, in truth, of blundering where I ought not to again."

"It has been a very long time since I have met anybody outside of this house. I have not met anybody new these last eighteen years barring new staff. And your father, and you, of course." Again, his head dropped.

Isabella knew that he was thinking of that awful day in the chapel. She knew it without a doubt. She was the last new person he had met, and she had passed out, fainted away in front of his eyes. And now

here she was expecting him to go through it again. No doubt he was dwelling on the idea that Esme Montague would also fall to the floor in horror. Or perhaps he thought she would laugh, just as the cruel people in the street had done so many years before.

“I know that I did not behave well when we first met, Elliot, and I am truly sorry. But I should not like to see you hidden away from the world forevermore because of my reaction. And please know that it was my *first* reaction, not my lasting one.”

“That is very kind of you, Isabella, but I do not seek to test you. I shall not turn and stand before you and search your face for any sign of revulsion. You are human, and you will feel what you will feel. There is nothing that I can do to change that, and I would not seek to change you in any way. And you need not take it upon yourself to have all the responsibility for the events of our first meeting. There were more people than you involved in it and, of all of them, you were the only one who did not have a say. It is a source of great shame to me, even if I was so selfish as to deny my shame at the time.”

“You do not need to feel ashamed, Elliot.”

“Do I not?” he said and, for a moment, she thought he was going to turn to look at her. But he did not. “I could tell what sort of a man your father was the moment I met him, and I knew that your opinion on the subject of marrying me was of little matter to him. It was

obvious when he saw no reason for the two of us to meet beforehand."

"But it is done," Isabella interjected.

"No, it is not really done," he said sadly. "Because you have confirmed for me all of my worst fears about your father. And I know that you have not told me everything about your treatment at his hands. But I know enough now to know that you have suffered in your life. I do not wish to embarrass you, Isabella because none of that is your fault. But for you to tell me that I am blameless, that I should be without shame, is not right." He paused for a moment and cleared his throat loudly. "The truth of the matter is, you have lived your entire life with a man who threatened and bullied and has continued to threaten and bully even though you are now a married woman. You lived your entire life with a monster, only to be married away to another monster. There are many nights when I lay awake knowing that I shall never be able to forgive myself for what I have done to you."

"But I do not want that. I do not want you to lay awake at night feeling that way. And you are not a monster, Elliot. You are a man. A man who has suffered more than I could ever have understood before meeting you."

"But that does not change what I did. Just because I suffered in my own life did not give me a right to cause suffering in yours. I do not blame you for collapsing to the floor on the day of our wedding. I

would not have blamed you for it even if there was not a mark upon my face. You were meeting your husband for the first time on your wedding day, and it was truly unforgivable. I should never have agreed to your father's proposal at all. I should never have sought to put my own selfish needs above those of a young woman I had never met."

"My father came to you?" Isabella did not know why it really mattered.

Of course, it should have come as no surprise to her that her father had approached the Duke with the offer of a daughter for sale. After all, it made sense. Elliot kept himself so much away from the world, so how else was he supposed to have met her father in the first place?

"Yes, I thought you knew."

"No, I did not know," she said quietly.

"Then I am sorry again, Isabella. All of this must be extraordinarily painful to you."

"You do not need to be sorry, Elliot. I had just not thought about it, and that is all. It had not occurred to me that my father had gone from door to door trying to sell me off."

“I do not think he went door-to-door, Isabella,” he said quietly. “I think he came directly to me, assuming that a man in my pitiable position could do no other than agree. And, in the end, that is exactly what happened, is it not? I was offered the chance of a different life. I was offered company for the first time in a long time, and I seized that opportunity with both hands.”

“If you are expecting me to be angry with you for it, then you are gravely mistaken, Elliot Covington,” Isabella said in a bossy tone. “Because my father is very good at spotting such vulnerability in people. My vulnerability was that I had no power to resist. Yours was that you were lonely and isolated. The fact that my father had played upon both vulnerabilities is an issue that he will have to answer for himself one day to a higher power than either you or me. But, just because this was all born of my father’s greed does not mean that we must live miserably, does it? Can we not take this situation away from my father’s hands, turn it into something new and different? Turn it into something that my father had never assumed it would be, or even cared to think about.”

“It will not be such a simple thing for me to forgive myself.”

“I already know that you do not forgive yourself easily, Elliot. You blame yourself for things that have been out of your control, and I know that you do. That is why you are here at this moment, that is why I find you in this tower again today.”

“Yes,” he said so quietly she could hardly hear him.

“I do not seek to upset you with my words, Elliot. I cannot begin to imagine what you suffered all those years ago and what you still suffer to this day. But I recognize a good human being who blames himself for nothing more than the crime of surviving. And now you are choosing to add to it the crime of loneliness. And yet you cannot see that neither one of these things are crimes. I do not see them as such, and it would be my dearest wish that you would not either.”

“I cannot tell you what it means to me that you have been so kind,” he began, and she could hear the emotion in his voice. “And please believe me when I tell you that it is enough for me that you do not hate me. There is surely many a woman in your position who would hate me without ceasing for the rest of her life, and yet you keep trying to help me.”

“And I shan’t give up trying to help you, Elliot. In helping you, I shall be helping myself.”

“How so?” Again, she had the strangest feeling that he had been about to turn to face her. Again, he did not.

“I do not wish to spend my days in solitude waiting for the evening to come. And as much as I am keen to see my dear Esme as many times a

week as she can be free to come, I would wish for your company also."

"But it is so difficult in the daytime. It is so hard for me when I am talking to you to remember that I am scarred at all, and I am afraid of turning suddenly and then seeing the look on your face."

"Elliot, we cannot spend forevermore standing sideways onto one another."

"Are you telling me that you are not afraid?"

"No, I am not telling you that. I *am* afraid. I am afraid that I will let myself down, I suppose, and in so doing, I would let you down also. And I would not wish to do that to you for the world."

"Well, you must understand that I have lived a certain way for a very long time now, and it will not be a simple thing for me to break it."

"I know that. I would not wish to push you into it."

"So, you must allow me to think for awhile upon everything that you have said."

"Yes, of course." Isabella felt her mouth go dry but knew that she must continue. "But will you not turn to me now? Here in this tower,

will you not turn to look at me?" Her heart was beating hard and fast.

"No," he said simply.

"But, Elliot…"

"Since you are afraid of letting me down, I am afraid to see revulsion on your face. When you fainted away in the chapel, it was not as painful for me as you might have thought. But I did not know you then, and I had not expected anything different. But now, now that we have come to know each other as we have, I do not think that I could stand to see your revulsion. I could not bear it."

"I understand." Isabella could feel tears in her eyes but blinked at them hard until they dissipated. "But we will both keep trying, will we not?"

"Yes, we will keep trying," he said, and she could see his handsome smile spreading.

Chapter 24

After dinner in her room, Isabella made her way down to the library with no expectation that Elliot would be there. He had been kind and friendly and had even agreed to walk back towards the house with her, albeit that he had been determined to stand so that only the left side of his face showed.

But she knew what such encounters took out of him, a man who had been left alone with his own emotions for such a very long time, and she had thought that he would very likely choose to spend the evening alone to fortify himself.

She did not blame him and did not mind, thinking that he would perhaps contemplate the things they had spoken of and come to some conclusion. After all, he had done just that with the doll and had, in the end, taken the doll as a keepsake and laid it on a chair in his own room. Perhaps this time alone was much-needed, and she was fully determined not to be disappointed by his absence.

However, she had just finished lighting the candles when she heard him come into the room.

“I have bought my violin with me, once again, and hope you are keen to play this evening.” He walked over to the fireplace and set his

violin on his armchair whilst he took a poker and prodded at the weakening flames. “I had the fire lit a little early this evening, and it seems to be dying out already. Carry on without me, I will just put some extra wood on this and see if I can get it going again.”

“As you wish,” she said with a laugh. “Or I could ring the bell and have somebody come and remake the fire if you would prefer it?”

“No, I am quite capable.” He laughed too, and she thought him such an unusual character in more ways than one.

As a man who had been born to be a Duke, it seemed such an unlikely thing that he was prepared to kneel in front of the fire and throw on logs in an attempt to revive it. There was something about the whole thing which made her like him all the more.

Her own father, an Earl and a much more minor person in terms of title, would not have pulled on his own boots, never mind put a fire to rights. But that was only one of many great differences between Elliot Covington and the Earl of Upperton, she knew that much.

“Then I shall start with something by Haydn again if you have no objection,” she said, taking her favourite piece of sheet music from the piano seat.

“No objection at all,” he said and carried on raking over the fire grate.

“I must admit, I find it quite soothing to be able to play something I have come to know by heart. I have played it so often since you bought me this beautiful piano that I hardly need to refer to the music anymore. Something about that gives me a sense of comfort, of safety. And it also gives me a little confidence, I think.”

“You play very well indeed, Isabella, and you ought to have confidence. After all, you have not played for a number of years, and in a matter of days, you have mastered it again. I think you are a very fine musician.”

“I should like to be able to compose my own melodies, just as you do. I even thought about trying it, but I sat here and sat here, and nothing would come to mind. And then I spent an inordinate amount of time wondering quite where it is such inspiration comes from, and then I was diverted again, not even thinking of a melody, but thinking of the mechanics of developing one. That is hardly artistic or creative, is it?”

“I suppose that melodies are not something that you suddenly decide to create,” he spoke thoughtfully, even though he had laughed heartily at her admission. “I think it is something that just comes to mind when you least expect it. You probably hum little tunes that you do not know and never heard before all the time. That is composing, is it not?”

“Oh, I see what you mean.” Isabella sat down on the piano stool and laid her hands on her lap while she thought. “So, one does not simply sit down and say *right, I am going to come up with a melody*. Instead, it is easier to wait for the melody to come to you, as it were?”

“Yes, that is it exactly. At least, that is where my own little thoughts come from. They just appear, just a few bars, but it is enough then to make a start. When you have a melody come into your head, and you play that shortest of pieces, it seems to open up your heart further to creativity, and the rest of it comes quite naturally. You must try it; see if I am not right.”

“I shall,” Isabella said and hoped that she would find herself humming the tunes sooner or later. “Oh, it is no good. I am already worrying that I shall never hum again, that nothing will ever come to me. Really.”

“Isabella, it will come.” Elliot rose from the now roaring fire. “Just as soon as you stop thinking about it. Or overthinking it.”

“Yes, I shall try to empty my mind.” She laughed. “But not until I have played the Haydn. I had better concentrate whilst I do that.”

Elliot turned to retrieve his violin and, as he crossed the room towards her, she surreptitiously peered up at him. She knew it would not do to simply stare at him outright, to boorishly override his own thoughts

and feelings on the matter of being looked at. But still, she wanted to test herself, just secretly.

It was true that it was not particularly light in the library, although the sudden flaming fire and the fact that he had crossed the path of her candelabra had done much to expose his disfigurement. And she had to admit, just to herself, that it was still not an easy thing to look at. But perhaps it was a little easier than it had been on that first day and, after all, progress was progress. Esme would have been proud of her, she felt sure.

“I am ready when you are, Isabella,” Elliot said, his smooth, deep voice coming from behind her once again.

Without another word, Isabella began to play. As soon as her fingers began to dance across the keys, she felt her confidence in the piece riding high. In the end, she closed her eyes, quite determined not to think about it, but just play, taking on board some of Elliot’s observations of life.

As she listened in the darkness, she realised that she had never played better than she was playing at that moment.

When they reached the end of the piece, Elliot clapped.

“I say, that was very well done.”

“Thank you,” she said and felt the warmth of his praise. “I closed my eyes, and I did not think about any of it.”

“Then I think you are perhaps ready to try a new instrument.”

“Right now? This minute? I am to learn how to play the violin?” Isabella could hear her own excitement.

“Yes, though I am not entirely sure that you will master it in a minute.” He laughed.

“That is not what I meant, and you know it. You are teasing me.” She laughed also.

“Here, just stand up and take the violin,” he said, and she held the violin just as she had seen him do so many times before.

“Like this?”

“Yes, that is perfect.” He was standing behind her, so close that she could feel his presence. “Now, I am sure that you know that different notes are formed when difference strings, or a different combination of strings, are pressed against the wood. Like this.”

Elliot reached out and covered her hand with his own, gently moving

her fingers over the strings and then pressing down gently. With his other arm, he reached around her and put the bow in her hand, again with his own hand covering hers.

Without a word, he moved her arms so that the bow ran across the strings. It was a simple collection of notes played gently as he pulled her arm backward and forwards, drawing the bow across the strings.

“Goodness me, that is wonderful,” Isabella said breathlessly. “I almost feel as if I am playing it.”

“Well, you are.” He laughed and, standing so close to her, she felt his chest against her back. “Well, I suppose we are both playing it. It is a joint effort, is it not?”

“Yes, although I think your share of the work is probably greater than my own.”

“So, let us try and make another note.” Gently, he took one of her fingers and moved it to another string, leaving the others in place.

Once again, he held her hand as he drew the bow backward and forwards across the violin. Such a simple change in the position of one finger had made an entirely different sound altogether. Isabella was quite amazed.

Once the notes were played, Elliot just stood still, not speaking or moving, for several moments. Isabella closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of almost being cradled in his arms, even as she stood facing away from him. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck, and its warmth gave her a wonderful, tingling feeling. Her mind had wandered entirely, and she felt sure that she could not take in a moment's tuition that she would remember later. She just wanted to stand there in his arms in the dim light of the library, and she wondered if he felt the same.

At that moment, there was a brisk knock on the door, and the two of them jumped apart, turning to see who was entering.

Chapter 25

“I really am terribly sorry to bother you this late in the evening.” Crawford Maguire walked into the dimly lit library.

“Not at all, Crawford,” Elliot began brightly. “Do take a seat. Here, I shall ring the bell for some tea. Or would you prefer sherry?”

“Please, do not go to any trouble on my account,” Crawford said and then faltered. “But perhaps a brandy if you will both join me.” He looked pointedly at Isabella, and her heart began to thump.

Why would she need a brandy? And what was Crawford Maguire doing at Coldwell Hall so late into the evening?

“Yes, why not?” Elliot spoke heartily; a little too heartily.

He strode across the room to serve three generous measures of brandy from the bottle on the small walnut drinks cabinet, moving smoothly through the gloom, his eyes adapting to the darkness more easily than her own.

There was something about him which made the air in the room feel suddenly charged. As Isabella studied Elliot’s tall frame, she could sense a tightness in his stance; a tautness. Something was wrong, and

he knew it as well as she did.

“Here.” He handed the first brandy glass to Isabella.

She did not particularly like brandy, having only ever taken it for mild shocks. But Isabella had a feeling that the shock coming her way now was set to be more than mild.

“Thank you, «she said in almost a whisper.

“Crawford.” Elliot had returned to the drinks cabinet for the other two glasses and handed one to his friend before they all took their seats around the dim glow of the fireplace.

“What has happened?” Isabella said the moment they were seated.

“Perhaps I ought to discuss things briefly with Elliot first before…” Crawford began, but Isabella cut him off.

“No, just say it. I could not bear to wait a moment longer in suspension, for it is clear to me that you have grave news, Crawford.” Isabella kept her voice as steady as possible and stopped her mind from wandering in any direction at all.

It was no good wondering what had happened and to whom. She could not run through the line of faces appearing in her mind and

imagine how she was about to feel to hear how they had come to grief. She would do better to wait until she knew something for sure.

“Then you have already perceived I have come here tonight with bad news,” Crawford spoke slowly and in a low voice as if keen to stave off the inevitable. “Isabella, forgive me, but I have just discovered that Lady Upperton has suffered a dreadful accident.” He bowed his head in the darkness.

“Mama?” Isabella was surprised to hear herself shriek as she rose to her feet. “My mother?” she said again as if she must have clarification.

“I am afraid so. She apparently fell down the stairs at Upperton Hall early this afternoon. The news did not reach me until early this evening. Forgive me; I would have come earlier had I known sooner.”

“Not at all. There is nothing to forgive.” Isabella hardly recognized her own voice. “And I thank you for coming to inform me.” She remained standing. “Is the doctor with her? Perhaps I should go straight to Upperton?” She looked at Elliot for his approval but could see that he knew, as she did, that there would be no point.

Her mouth was dry, and she knew in her heart that her mother was dead. But if she did not say it out loud, and if she did not allow anybody else present to say it, then it would not be true. Not for a few minutes, at any rate.

“Isabella,” Elliot said and rose from his seat.

As he stood before her, the fire cast a pale glow across his features, and she could just make out the raised, ruined skin. But the little she could see did not upset her; it did not repel her.

“Please, do not say it, «she said with her voice finally beginning to crack with emotion. “I know what you are both trying to tell me, but do not say it out loud. Not yet. Please, not yet.” Tears rolled down her cheeks, and Elliot immediately reached up and gently wiped them away with his thumbs as he cupped her face in his hands.

“I am so sorry, Isabella.” He spoke with quiet and heartfelt sympathy; she was certain of that.

But he knew very well the pain of losing a mother in violent circumstances. And what could be more violent than a fall down the stairs? *A fall?* Surely her mother had not simply fallen down a staircase she had used day in day out for so many years?

“Is there anything you would wish me to do? Either of you?” Crawford’s voice sounded as if it was coming from much further away, and Isabella knew that she must be settling into shock.

“I cannot think there is anything to be done tonight, Crawford.” Elliot

kept his voice low. “But I thank you.”

“What happened?” Isabella said as a cold shiver ran over her body.

“Excuse me?” Crawford was playing for time.

“How did my mother fall down the stairs?”

“In truth, I do not know.” Crawford sounded so apologetic that Isabella felt sorry for him.

“She was pushed,” Isabella spoke with a cold finality.

A dead silence seemed to have descended upon the library, and nobody spoke a word for many moments. In the end, Elliot crouched before the fire and added two more logs to the dying flames. Then he gently prized the brandy glass from Isabella’s hands and took it across to the drinks cabinet where he added more of the fiery liquid.

“Here,” he said as he pressed it into her hands. “And sit down, Isabella.” He gently pushed her back down into her seat opposite him.

Isabella flopped down into the armchair realizing that there was nowhere to go and nothing to be done. Her mother was dead, and even her refusal to speak the thing aloud would not change it.

“My father did it, «she said finally after taking a large gulp of the brandy and wincing. “I know he did. Charges should be brought against him for murder.”

“I am sorry, Isabella, but I did not hear anything which would suggest your father had anything to do with it. As far as I can discern, the whole thing is thought to have been a terrible accident.” Crawford cleared his throat loudly.

“Forgive me, Crawford. I do not wish to make you uncomfortable with my assertion. Nor do I wish to make you uncomfortable either, Elliot.” She turned to look at her husband.

Elliot was sitting face onto her, not bothering to make any attempt at hiding his scars. Isabella let her mind wander inappropriately for a few moments; she did not want to think about her mother and how she must have suffered in her final moments. Instead, she thought of Elliot. Had he simply forgotten to hide, a thing which came as second nature to him, when the shocking news had been revealed? Had the gravity of the situation taken his mind off his own cares for a while?

She could not see his face in great detail, but more detail than she ordinarily saw him. And it did not make her afraid, not for a moment. Was this the simple case of familiarity that Crawford had felt so sure would come sooner or later? Or was it the subdued lighting taking the edge off it all, making him easier to regard?

“I am not uncomfortable,” Elliot said reassuringly.

“Nor I.” Crawford echoed his sentiments. “But do you have a strong suspicion that your father could hurt your mother so badly? Hurt her enough to end her life?”

“Yes,” Isabella said instantly. “I have no doubt about it.”

“I wish I knew how to proceed in such cases,” Crawford began, and it was clear he wanted to help. So clear that Isabella was inordinately touched by it all. “I do not know how one moves a case of this nature to the courts without first-hand evidence, especially if the thing has already been deemed an accident by the attending physician.” Isabella could see his mighty, vaguely stooped shoulders shrug in the dim light.

“I know there is no way.” Isabella wanted to put the poor man at his ease. “I know in my heart what has happened, as sure as I know that my father shall never be brought to justice for it. And he will not be the first man to have murdered his wife in cold blood only to find no consequence for the crime. It is the way of things.” Isabella felt desolate.

She had always known that she had loved her mother, however ambiguous that love had been at times. And perhaps she had been a

little too hard-hearted towards her over the years. It was clear to her now that Lady Upperton had likely known her husband was capable of killing her.

But that ought not to have stopped her silently, secretly, supporting her own daughter. It ought not to have stopped her from providing comfort when the two of them were alone. But that was something that Lady Upperton had never done.

Isabella was determined not to take on such guilt. She was sad, heartbroken even, and that would have to be sufficient. It was enough, surely, without taking the blame for feeling less than she ought for a woman who did not even attend her wedding. Isabella knew that her mother had always protected herself from hurt of any kind. She could not even face her daughter's pain, and so chose to turn away from it all and leave Isabella to suffer alone. What on earth did Isabella have to feel guilty about? And then it hit her.

"This is all my fault," she said, and the shock of the realization almost led her to let go of her brandy glass.

"Isabella?" Elliot began to rise from his seat again but stopped. "How on earth can you think that?"

"I was the one who declared that you should not give my father another penny, was I not?"

“But…”

“And I knew what he was capable of. He even told me that my mother would suffer for it all if I did not convince you to increase the settlement you had made upon me.”

“But Isabella…”

“And it was out of spite. And not just spite towards my father but, and may God forgive me, my mother, also. I wanted her to know how I had felt all those years. I wanted her to realize that I had felt helpless and afraid and that the simplest of touches or a kind word from her would have at least made me feel loved.” Isabella almost choked on the sob which erupted so suddenly that she was taken by surprise. “I wanted to punish her for not even being at my side when I was married. Well, behold my success! See how badly I have punished her. Oh, for the power to take it all back, I would give anything.” Isabella dropped her head and cried.

“Isabella, please do not do this to yourself.” She had not seen or heard Elliot approach and only became aware of him when he knelt before her and took her hands in his own.

“How can I not blame myself? What would it have harmed *me* had you given my father the money?” she said angrily. “It would not have

made a jot of difference to my life, would it? And yet I was too peevish to behave as a better woman and think for a moment what my mother would suffer because of it all. We do not have the right to punish others in this life, and yet I took that right as my own. Even if God can forgive me, I shall never, ever forgive myself."

"Neither God nor you need to search about for forgiveness to give, Isabella." Elliot squeezed her hands. "For I paid your father the money anyway."

"You paid him?" Isabella looked at Elliot incredulously and then began to shake her head. "Elliot, you cannot simply say something like that to alleviate my guilt."

"I speak the truth, Isabella."

"He does speak the truth. I was the one who made the payment on Elliot's behalf," Crawford added.

Isabella looked up at him, her eyes stinging, and the soft skin of her face already raw from crying. "As I do all of Elliot's banking business, it was a task much like any other."

"Really?"

"Yes. But I can understand why you might think that Elliot and I

would seek to ease your suffering with a falsehood," he spoke in so kindly a manner that her tears began afresh.

"I would not wish to give offence to either of you," Isabella said hurriedly.

"I am not offended." Isabella could see that Elliot was smiling at her and thought how beautiful that smile was; how kind and caring.

"And neither am I. And I would gladly show you the docket from the bank if it would put your mind at rest." Crawford was clearly not insulted.

"Oh, goodness no. I believe you, really I do." Isabella took the handkerchief that Elliot handed her. "Thank you." She smiled at him sadly.

"Forgive me for going over your head and paying your father without your own authorization. In truth, I had thought that you would never discover my deception," Elliot began awkwardly.

"I am not angry."

"I knew you were angry and embarrassed by your father's behaviour, but I wanted to be on the safe side, just in case your father intended to carry out his threat to hurt your mother. I did not want you to come

to regret a decision made in anger. But I did not go against your wishes lightly. I agonized over it for some days before acceding to your father's request."

"Thank you, Elliot. Thank you for acting in reason when I could not."

"Had I known you a little better, then I should not have hidden it from you. I should have told you what I had done and why. But at the time, we were still just barely acquainted, and I could tell that I had already pressed you for too much information in regard to your father's behaviour as a man, and I did not want to make you even more uneasy."

"Elliot, you did the right thing, and I shall always be grateful to you."

"But in the end, it changed nothing, did it?" Elliot, still on bended knees before her, sighed.

"Yes, it did. It changed how I would live the rest of my life. You spared me from the most dreadful guilt, and I cannot tell you what that means to me. Whatever awful, pointless justification my father gives himself for his crime, at least he cannot soothe himself that I am ultimately to blame, can he?"

"No, that he cannot do." Elliot rose and took her glass before pulling her to her feet. "I think you should lay down for a while. I will call

Kitty to come up and bring you some hot milk and a sleeping draught."

"Thank you," Isabella said and was grateful for his kindness and care.

Chapter 26

The next days seemed to pass in a haze of emotions for Isabella. She was afraid to go to her mother's funeral because it would make the whole thing absolutely real. Even though she knew without a doubt that her mother was dead, still she had moments in which it was almost as if nothing had changed.

Isabella knew that it was because she had not been there at the time. She had witnessed nothing, nor had she seen her mother's body.

With an awful wrench to her stomach, Isabella wondered if her brother had seen it happen. As unpleasant as he was, at just fourteen years, it would have been a most terrible thing. For anybody to see one parent murder the other would be indescribable, but for a boy of his age, it would be unthinkable. And for Anthony to have to continue to live under that roof with the knowledge of what his father had done could not bear thinking about.

Even without witnessing the incident, surely Anthony knew enough about life at Upperton Hall to know his father capable of such a thing. Even to suspect it would make life with his father unbearable from now on, surely.

And yet, just as she was powerless to help her mother, Isabella could

not see how she was able to help her brother either. He was in line to be the next Earl of Upperton, and nothing would stand in the way of that. And the person who would be charged with the boy's instruction on the duties that would one day be his could only be the current Earl.

The whole thing was impossible, and all that Isabella could do in the end was hope that her brother was blissfully ignorant of all that was so painfully obvious to her.

Kitty had helped her to get ready for the funeral, providing more comfort to her in those minutes than her mother had ever provided in a lifetime. How confusing it all was to be grieving for somebody when you were unsure of your feelings for them and their feelings for you. It was making the whole thing so much harder.

Kitty had worn black also and, as they both descended the great staircase, it was clear to Isabella that Kitty had fully determined to go with her.

In the great entrance hall, Isabella pulled her thick black shawl around her shoulders as she stared blankly at the wooden horse and armour-plated rider. If only she could be the knight hiding inside, ready to take off for adventures anywhere but there, shielded from pain and sadness by a thick metal shell.

"Your Grace?" Kitty said, and Isabella turned back to answer before

she realized that Kitty was not speaking to her.

“Good morning, Kitty.” Elliot was striding down the staircase dressed in black and wearing something over his head. “Unfortunately, necessary for the world outside.” He laughed sadly and pointed to what Isabella could now see was a hood of some kind.

It was made of black fabric and was loose fitting. Isabella could not help staring at him for a moment as she took in the curious headwear.

It was a full hood which covered most of his scarring and a good deal of the unblemished side of his face. It was a garment which would undoubtedly draw almost as much attention as would its lack.

“Kitty, I shall be attending the funeral.” Elliot smiled warmly at the maid, despite the hood, and effectively relieved her of the awful duty.

“Elliot, I had not expected…” Isabella began.

“You had not expected your husband to attend the funeral of your mother at your side?”

“I am sorry. I did not mean…”

“You need not apologize. Since I never leave Coldwell Hall, it was a perfectly natural assumption.” He looked at her a little sheepishly as if

the hood itself gave him almost as much embarrassment as the ruined skin beneath its soft folds. “But I shall be coming with you.”

“Thank you, «she said and took the arm he offered to her before they walked out of the immense doorway and across to the waiting carriage.

They traveled much of the way to the church in silence. Isabella was deeply touched by Elliot’s sudden appearance and wondered just what it had cost him to get as far as the carriage. And yet, despite the strangeness of the hood and her nerves about the funeral, Elliot’s presence at that moment was more reassuring than anything she had experienced in her life.

“I hope my appearance does not cause you embarrassment,” Elliot finally spoke just as the carriage drew up to the church.

“No. I am very grateful that you have come today. I know it cannot have been an easy decision to make, and I shall not forget it.” She touched his arm before the door opened and their driver helped her down.

Elliot held out his arm again and walked her slowly to the freshly dug grave in the churchyard. Isabella felt the weight of reality sitting heavily upon her and wondered how she would make it through.

Her mother was so young to have had her life ended so brutally; she was not yet five and forty years old, just seven years older than Elliot, and the thought of it made Isabella feel nauseous.

“Will you manage?” Elliot whispered into her ear.

“Yes, «she said in a dry whisper.

The service had been brief, and she had no doubt that it was on her father’s demand that the Reverend had kept it so.

Throughout the ceremony, Isabella cast several looks at her father and was surprised to see how drawn he looked.

The Earl of Upperton looked grey and his eyes somewhat sunken in their sockets as if he had neither eaten nor slept for days. It was hardly what she had expected at all, and she wondered if it was a guilty reaction to whatever angry outburst had brought them all to the graveside that day.

Whenever he looked over at her, Isabella looked away from her father in disgust. She could not look upon the murderer and did not want to appear to offer him solace with something as simple as eye contact.

Instead, she looked for her young brother. Anthony was standing between his father and Isabella’s old governess. Although Anthony

was now at Eton, the governess remained in the employ of the Earl.

The governess, who had never been particularly warm, tried more than once to take Anthony's hand. Isabella watched in dismay as she saw her brother shake away the woman's unusual attempt at kindness time and time again.

Not only did he shrug her away, but Isabella saw clearly how he looked at the woman with arrogant contempt. So, he did not feel the need for comfort as Isabella did. Perhaps it was merely a youthful performance. After all, Anthony had been raised in arrogance and heavily schooled in the outward display the Earl in waiting must make in every given scenario.

And yet, Isabella had a creeping sensation that there was more to it than that. She tried to look into his eyes but could not hold the gaze. She had expected to see pain there, some sort of emotional upheaval behind the arrogant façade, but she could see nothing. There was nothing there to suggest that his mother's death and subsequent funeral was anything more than an inconvenience to him.

Surely his father's evil ways had not penetrated so far into his young soul? Isabella shuddered, and Elliot turned to her a little. She nodded briefly to indicate that she was alright; she was managing.

Isabella continued to look around and was relieved to see Esme

Montague among the other mourners with her own parents. She would be glad to have a few minutes with her at the end of the service to provide a little stability. Esme gave her the briefest flicker of a smile when their eyes met, and Isabella felt tears well in her own eyes. How she loved Esme, and how glad she was that she still had her friend in her life.

As the service drew to its conclusion, and her mother's coffin was lowered into the ground, Isabella choked back a sob. As Elliot put a steadying arm around her shoulders, Isabella became aware of so many eyes on them.

Even in the midst of grief, there were still some who would let their curiosity lead them astray. Isabella felt a surge of anger at the idea that Elliot, a finer man than any stood at her mother's graveside that day, would still have to suffer the stares of the curious. What a world they all lived in.

As soon as the coffin was lowered and the last handfuls of dirt thrown in, Isabella's included, Esme hurried across to her.

"Oh, my dear Isabella," Esme said with red-rimmed eyes.

Of all present, Isabella knew that her dear friend's grief and sympathy were genuine.

“Esme, thank you for coming.”

“How could I not? Are you going back to Upperton after the service?”

“I could not,” Isabella said and felt fortified by the feel of Esme’s hands in her own. “I could not be there with the man who murdered my mother.”

“You believe your father is to blame.” It was not a question, and it was clear that Esme was perfectly prepared to accept the theory as true.

After all, she knew well of the Earl of Upperton and his cruel ways.

“Yes. I could not be in his company.”

“And yet he is waiting for you. I can see him out of the corner of my eye hovering and awaiting your presence,” Esme spoke urgently.

“Oh no, I can hardly escape his company here.”

“You may leave whenever you wish, Isabella. Your father has no rights over you.” Elliot reminded her of his presence at her side.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Esme said and looked up at the hooded face without any hint of awkwardness. “I did not mean to talk across

you." She bobbed low. "I am Esme Montague, and I am pleased to make your acquaintance finally, albeit in such sad circumstances."

"And I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Montague." Elliot bowed also, and Isabella felt sure she heard a little relief in his voice as if he was truly expecting an adverse reaction.

"I am looking forward to my next visit to Coldwell Hall. You have a very beautiful home, Your Grace, and it was a rare treat to be in such beautifully tended grounds." Esme continued to look at him, giving no hint that she had taken in the curious hood at all.

As the two continued to speak, Isabella could see now just how many people did not have Esme Montague's good grace. They now stared openly. With the business of the Countess of Upperton's burial over, they were free to indulge themselves. Worse still, Isabella knew that Elliot was painfully aware of it all. She could have screamed at them all to go to the Devil with their filthy curiosity.

"Elliot." Isabella touched his arm and looked up at him. "Would you be so kind as to keep Esme company for a moment whilst I speak to my father. I know I must do it, for it is impossible to escape the encounter here."

"Of course. But please stay close. I shall not remain silent if the Earl seeks to torment you." His voice was rich and smooth, and the

authority in it was unmistakable.

Isabella could see Esme smile, clearly impressed with her old friend's new husband.

"I shall." She nodded briefly at them both before turning to walk towards her father.

The Earl was, just as Esme had said, hovering awkwardly a few feet from his wife's final resting place. He looked even worse close up, and Isabella wondered if she had her theory quite right. Could guilt and remorse really make a person look so low?

"You wish to speak to me?" Isabella chose not to address her father.

"Isabella, I am so very sorry."

"For killing my mother?" Isabella kept her voice low; she was not keen for the onlookers to pick up on her words.

"Please, believe me, I did not kill your mother. I would never have done such a thing."

"You would never have pushed her down the stairs? I find that curiously hard to believe." Despite the harshness of her words, Isabella felt a little uneasy.

There was something in his expression which suggested he was almost devastated. And yet she had seen his open contempt for her mother for her entire life. How could he be devastated now by her loss?

“I know I have been hard over the years, but you cannot truly believe I would hurt her like that.”

“You told me yourself that you would hurt her if I did not convince my husband to pay you even more of a settlement on me.”

“But I did not mean to see it through. Not like that, at any rate.”

“But you would have hurt her, would you not? In some other way?” Isabella was not convinced of anything anymore.

She knew her father was cruel, but did he really have it in him to kill?

“I would have hurt her only as a means of hurting you and securing the funds I needed. I knew you would find some way to convince your husband to pay me.”

Isabella could hardly believe what she was hearing. The admission struck her as almost brutally honest. He spoke with shame at his behaviour, but it was at his threat and intention to do some harm to her mother, not to kill her, she felt sure of it.

“Actually, I told the Duke not to pay you a penny,” Isabella said defiantly and winced when she saw the old flash of anger in his eyes; old habits clearly did die hard.

“But he did pay me, Isabella. And so, I had no cause to hurt your mother.”

“You did not have a true cause to hurt my mother either way. You never did!” Isabella spoke a little more loudly than she had intended, but her anger was threatening to boil over.

She was aware of Elliot shifting a little some feet away from her as if ready to rush in and save her.

Once again, she had that wonderful feeling of protection.

“Whatever you think of me, I did not kill your mother.” He began to sound exasperated and desolate all at once. “I did not kill her.” His voice broke a little, and the sound took her back.

Isabella had never seen a moment’s emotion from the man before her until then.

“So, my mother just fell, did she?”

“No, she did not fall.” His words brought Isabella up short; she had been expecting flat denial. “She was pushed.”

“Pushed?” Isabella, despite knowing her mother’s death had been anything but an accident, still felt shocked to have it confirmed.

“Yes, your mother was pushed.” The Earl seemed ready to unravel before her very eyes.

Isabella felt hot and nauseous, and she wondered what on earth her father was about to tell her.

“If you did not push her, then who did?” Her voice was raspy and her throat dry and suddenly sore.

“Anthony.”

Chapter 27

“But I do not understand, Elliot. It was my understanding that things were going very well. Very well indeed.” Crawford Maguire’s exasperation was clear in his voice.

“It does not change what I did. It does not change what her father did either.” Elliot had known beforehand that this would be extraordinarily difficult to explain.

After all, when a person had what they wanted, they did not customarily find a way of letting it go. But that was what Elliot had decided to do; what he knew he must do.

“But as you told it to me, Isabella does not blame you for the manner of your marriage. She understands, Elliot. Did you not say so yourself?”

“Yes, and I know that she *does* understand. If I am honest, that makes it even worse.”

“How on earth does the understanding of your wife make things worse?”

“Because it reminds me what a fine person she is. It reminds me day

in day out what I did to her."

"Does it really matter how the marriage began? Surely what is important is how it continues."

"I understand what you are saying to me, Crawford, and I know that you do so because you are my oldest and finest friend. And I thank you for it; please do not think that I am ungrateful for your kind words, for I am not."

"You may not be ungrateful, Elliot, but you most certainly are obtuse." Crawford was struggling to hide his annoyance, and Elliot was sorry for having put his friend in such a position. "Has something happened? Has the poor woman made some other mistake that you cannot forgive her for?"

"Isabella has never done anything for which I could not forgive her," Elliot said and knew that his friend had not meant his harsh words. "And I know that you are referring to the doll, and I have, in my own way at least, apologized for my reaction. And it is true we are far past that now and have no need to speak of it again. The doll is in my room, for heaven's sake, beneath the portrait of my dear Eleanor."

"Then what has effected this sudden change? What has brought you to this terrible decision?" Crawford spread his hands wide and leaned back in his chair.

Elliot sighed. He had been far from looking forward to this meeting, and even as he had walked through the corridors of Coldwell Hall towards the study he had long ago set aside for his friend, he wondered if he would actually say the words out loud.

But ever since Isabella had told him it all, he had been unable to think of anything else. She had suffered enough, and he would see to it that she did not suffer a moment longer.

“You know me better than anybody, Crawford, and something has changed, as you have quite rightly perceived. After her mother’s funeral last week, Isabella told me something that has made me question my own actions, my own selfishness.”

“And that was?”

“This must remain between the two of us, my dear Crawford.”

“Of course.” Crawford looked a little affronted and rightly so.

“I know that your word is inviolate, Crawford, forgive me. But this cannot even go as far as Kitty, that is how serious it is.”

“Then it must be very serious indeed. For goodness sake, what is it?” Crawford looked suddenly concerned.

“You know as well as I do that Isabella immediately suspected her father of her mother’s death. You were there, and you heard it with your own ears, did you not?”

“Yes, and I did not doubt her, I must say. I have never liked the Earl of Upperton, and I have found his dealings with you in respect of his daughter unseemly and underhand. It would not surprise me to hear that the man would stick at nothing, especially when he had already threatened his wife as a means of coercing his daughter. But as we all agreed at the time, there would never be a way to secure the proof of it since such proof had never been secured by those who first attended the scene. What on earth is there that we can do about it?” Crawford shrugged.

“I did not intend to do anything at all about it. As you say, the thing cannot be proved. But the Earl of Upperton had a few moments with Isabella shortly after the funeral service, and it was then that he admitted to his only daughter that the death of her mother had not been an accident.”

“You are saying that he confessed to the thing? The Earl of Upperton admitted murdering the Countess by pushing her down the stairs?” Crawford’s eyes were as round as saucers.

“No, he did not confess.”

“Then I do not understand. Either her death was an accident, or it was murder; there is no middle ground. Either the Earl killed her, or he did not.”

“He did not.” Elliot knew that he was fast reaching the point of no return.

However, he knew in his heart that he could trust Crawford Maguire with any piece of information on God’s earth and know that it would never be uttered abroad. “He told Isabella that Anthony, the young man who will one day be the Earl of Upperton, murdered his own mother.”

“Isabella’s younger brother pushed his own mother down the stairs?” Crawford’s mouth hung open in a way which almost made Elliot inappropriately laugh.

“That is exactly what he told her.”

“Then it is clear that the man would stick at nothing.” Crawford Maguire shook his head violently. “That he would blame his own son for it is *appalling*. The man would obviously stoop to any depth to save his own hide.”

“But his hide was not in any danger, was it?” Elliot said quietly and

studied his friend's face. "After all, as we all knew at the time, nobody suspected the death to be a crime. To all intents and purposes, the Earl of Upperton had got away with murder. The only person who did suspect him, whom he always *knew* would suspect him of it, was his daughter. But he knew that she could not accuse him of it without evidence, and so he was in the clear, do you not think?"

"Well, since you put it so succinctly, yes, he was in the clear."

"And Isabella believes him," Elliot added.

"Of all people, if Isabella believes it, I think it must be true. But really, that a boy of his age could commit such an atrocity and against his own mother is unthinkable." Crawford was still shocked.

"He is a product of his father's upbringing, is he not? After all, as Isabella says, Anthony has only ever seen his mother treated with contempt. And she was treated with contempt by the only person who has instructed Anthony on how life ought to be lived. Is he not mirroring his father's behaviour, albeit in a most extreme manner?"

"Our fathers do have the greatest influence over us, that is true," Crawford said thoughtfully. "But what possible reason could the young man have had to push his mother down the stairs?"

"Isabella asked her father the same question," Elliot said. "And this is

the hardest part of all to understand. There had been no argument between them whatsoever."

"Nothing at all had passed between mother and son?"

"No, the Earl of Upperton was at the bottom of the stairs and saw his wife approaching from above. As if from nowhere, Anthony stepped out and put a hand squarely on his mother's back before shoving her hard and standing with wide eyes to watch her fall, to see her hit every step on her way down. I think the whole thing has quite frightened the Earl."

"I am not surprised it has frightened him. And perhaps it is time that dreadful man was made frightened by something. Perhaps it is fitting that he has been frightened by the fruits of his own labours. He instructed the young man in the ways of the world, and murdering his own mother was his interpretation of his father's teachings."

"I think you have it exactly, Crawford. And in truth, that is exactly how Isabella sees it."

"And how is Isabella? How is she taking it all?"

"She is not at all well, Crawford. It has hit her very hard indeed although it is true to say that there was no love lost between Isabella and her brother. He had been raised by his father to see his elder

sister as beneath him, almost amongst the ranks of the servants."

"And I take it that Anthony was physically violent with Isabella also?" Crawford asked the question awkwardly.

"Not until the very end, she assures me." Elliot felt his stomach tighten, knowing that he would have to tell the tale. "Some weeks before she was due to come here to Coldwell Hall and marry me, Isabella attempted an escape from Upperton Hall."

"I had no idea." Crawford sounded amazed.

"And neither did I, until Isabella and I talked. You see, I asked her exactly the same question as you did. I asked her if Anthony had ever been violent towards her, had ever hurt her physically. She told me that he had only done so once. Naturally, I asked her to recount the circumstances for I should now like to have a better account of that young man's character. And that is when she told me of the plan she had made to escape her family and make her way to Ireland. As a matter of fact, to escape me if the truth be known."

"But that is before you knew her and before she knew you, my dear fellow."

"I cannot see how that makes it better, Crawford. In the dead of night, Isabella attempted to creep out of her house and into the town to walk

through the darkness so that she might get onto the earliest post-chaise unseen. For a young woman to be forced to do that rekindles the shame that I felt at the time."

"She clearly did not make it out of Upperton Hall," Crawford said and seemed keen to have the rest of the story.

"She had crept down the great staircase and made her way almost to the door before her brother appeared. And I shudder to think about it, but it is very clear from her telling of it that he knew well that she planned to escape. He had found in her bag a timetable of sailings from Liverpool to Ireland and, instead of taking the thing straight to his father, he sought to capture her himself. That dreadful child must have waited night after night in the darkness of the hall to see if his sister would try to make her escape. I am only grateful now that he did not apprehend her on the stairs, for the Lord only knows what would have happened to her."

"And so, he physically stopped her?"

"He pulled her back through the hall by her hair. And apparently, he did not let go until his father instructed him to do so. That his ungentlemanly brutality was witnessed by so many of their servants did not bother the young man at all. He cared only for his father's opinion on the matter."

“The child is surely a monster.”

“He was raised to be a monster by a monster, that is my genuine belief.”

“But I do not see how Isabella can be blamed for it.”

“Good heavens, I would never blame Isabella for such a thing. What on earth gives you such an idea, Crawford?”

“I daresay it is the fact that you now seek information on how an annulment to your marriage might be obtained. Surely that is punishment, is it not?”

“I do not seek to have the marriage annulled as a means of punishing Isabella, but as a means of setting her free.”

“But how would that be setting her free? I do not understand.”

“Isabella has lived her life with a man who was so awful he has raised a son who would kill his own mother. What that woman must have suffered in her life, I cannot begin to imagine. And then, there was I, a man so lonely that he would do any selfish thing to alleviate that loneliness.”

“You cannot compare yourself to the Earl of Upperton, Elliot,”

Crawford said firmly.

“I do not compare myself to him. Not exactly, at any rate. But I have her a prisoner here as much as her father and brother had kept her prisoner at Upperton Hall. Her entire life has been ordered by others, myself included.”

“Elliot, that is not exactly the case. And is it not true of many young women that they do not have great choices in this life?”

“That does not make it right, does it?”

“No, it does not. But you have given your wife many great freedoms. You have not kept her a prisoner for a moment. She is allowed any visitor she chooses, you have made that very clear. And she might visit whomever she chooses, you have made that clear also. So how is it that you think you have made a prisoner of Isabella?”

“Because I cannot go out with her into the world, and I know that she would wish it.”

“I am sure that she would wish it, but that is something that will come with time.”

“No, it will not come with time,” Elliot said determinedly. “My attendance at her mother’s funeral taught me as much. I will not go

out again."

"That was but one expedition, Elliot. The first in a great many years. What on earth did you expect to feel?"

"I do not want the society of the world outside, Crawford, that is not going to change. And I do not want to keep my wife a prisoner of my own idiosyncrasies, and so I must beg you to do what you can to help me secure an annulment. No, I know that securing an annulment will not be easy, but you must give me your word that you will attempt it. You must find out as much as you can about the process, I beg of you."

"Of course," Crawford said looking almost as downcast as the Duke.

Chapter 28

“After we had spent all those minutes together talking after your mother’s funeral, I would have imagined the Duke would have been sitting for afternoon tea with us today,” Esme said and was clearly disappointed.

“Please believe me when I tell you that it is certainly nothing to do with you that Elliot is not here with us today. In truth, I think it has more to do with me.”

“Do you mean because of what your father told you about Anthony?” Esme said in a whisper as the two of them sat cloistered in the drawing room of Coldwell Hall.

It was only Esme’s second visit, and already she seemed at home there, just as she had always seemed at home at Upperton Hall. It was very likely that it did not matter where she and her friend sat down to talk, Esme was most comfortable.

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Ever since we sat down and talked about it, Elliot has been very quiet. I know that he does not blame me exactly for what happened, but I cannot help thinking that he finds me now to be a little tainted by association. After all, the same man who raised Anthony raised me, did he not?”

“That might be so, but that same man raised you both very differently. He did not raise you to be arrogant and entitled. He did not raise you to be cruel and intimidating. He raised your brother to be those things, and he now reaps the benefits of that. But I cannot believe for a moment that Elliot would think you in any way the same. I can hardly believe that he would think you in any way affected.” Esme had finished her tea and was reaching forward to pour them both another.

“It is all that I can think of which explains his absence and his extreme quiet when we *are* together. We have not played music in the library for many days, since before I heard of my mother’s death.”

“Perhaps that is why, Isabella. Perhaps the Duke is giving you time to adjust to the awful shock of hearing that your mother had died and the even greater shock of hearing of the manner of her passing. Perhaps he is giving you some time in which to adjust to it all. Everything you have told me of the Duke would lead me to suspect him of being a very kind and considerate sort of a man. And I must say, all the better for meeting in person.” Esme gave a broad smile.

“I still have yet to thank you for resolutely ignoring the hood that my husband wore to my mother’s funeral when everybody else could do nothing but stare right at it,” Isabella said and smiled in return.

“What hood?” Esme said and then chuckled.

“Esme, whatever would I do without you?”

“I am sure that you would manage, but I should not like to test the theory.”

“And neither would I.”

“I do think that it might take a little time for you to adjust to everything that happened, Isabella. I know that you and the Duke were getting on better and better all the time, but all is not lost. You will get back to where you were before all this sadness and tragedy occurred. Just give it time and a little patience.”

“It had taken so long for us to get to where we were, and it was so tentative, almost precarious, that I do not know if we will ever achieve such a moment again.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we had become a little close on the last evening we were together, just before dear Crawford Maguire came with the dreadful news.”

“Close how?” Esme sat bolt upright and put her teacup down on her

saucer with a clang. “What do you mean? Spare me none of the details, miss nothing out.” Esme was full of excitement.

“It was nothing very serious,” Isabella said, but she knew that her cheeks were flushing scarlet.

She had thought of that evening more than once and, when she did, it always brought a rosy glow to her face. Whenever she closed her eyes and remembered him behind her, his hands over hers as she worked the bow and held the violin, it was almost as if she could still feel him there.

He had covered her hands with his own most firmly, and she remembered the warmth of his breath on the back of her neck. It had been the most intimate moment of her entire life, despite the fact that she had been married for some months.

She knew that her feelings towards him had changed again that night. It seemed to her that her feelings for him changed a little here and there as every day passed. But some of the changes were bigger than others, more memorable somehow, and that was certainly the most memorable change of them all.

It was the night when Elliot Covington, the man, had become attractive to her. Not the Duke, and not just the beautiful, unblemished side of his face, but everything about him, inside and

out.

And then there had come the knock on the door which had changed everything, had set them back so far that she did not know if they would ever return to that moment again.

“Serious enough to make you blush, my dear. For goodness sake, tell me all of it.” Esme had risen from her own armchair and scampered around the low table to sit next to her friend so closely on the couch that there was not even space for a feather between them.

In the end, Isabella had told her everything. Esme was her oldest and finest friend, after all, and were these not the very things that friends expected to hear? Had it been the other way around, Isabella knew that she would have pressed Esme for every delicious moment.

And it had been wonderful to say it out loud. It had given Isabella a little thrill of excitement to see the look of wonder on Esme’s face. A very important moment had, indeed, passed between man and wife, and the look on Esme’s face was somehow confirmation of it.

“Oh, how wonderful!” Esme said over and over again throughout the telling of the tale. “How very romantic.”

“Do you think it is romantic, Esme?” Isabella said as she felt uncertainty creep over her once more.

“Of course, I do,” Esme said dumbfounded. “Why? Do you not think it is so?”

“At the time I did, yes. In truth, I am sure I felt it. But in these last days, I cannot help thinking that I have somehow mistaken it all. It is as if it could not have possibly been that Elliot and I were ever so close. It is hard to explain, but I cannot imagine he thinks of that night as I do. If he even thinks of it at all.”

“That cannot be true. Not if everything which passed between you was exactly as you told it to me.”

“It was.”

“Then the Duke cannot fail to have been moved by it. Think about it, Isabella. The Duke, a man who has spent the better part of eighteen years alone, barring his friend and his servants, would surely have been starved of the finer feelings of closeness. For him to have been so close as to be touching you that night must be among the things he will never forget as long as he lives. Isabella, it cannot have meant nothing to him. It cannot possibly have meant nothing to him. Do you not see?”

“When you explain it out as you do, yes, I do see. But then what can explain his behaviour towards me now? I cannot quite put it into

words, Esme, but Elliot is so very distant currently. I accept what you say that he might be giving me room for adjustment in trying times, but his determination to be away from me is something that I find peculiarly hurtful."

"And you are sure that he is determined to be away from you?"

"Yes, I am. I have sat in the library night after night playing the piano and waiting for him. And now I do not even bother to play; I sit there in silence staring down at the keys and wishing that he would come. But he does not come, Esme. He stays away."

"It strikes me that you must speak to him about it," Esme said and held up a hand when Isabella made to object. "What have you to lose by speaking to him? As far as I can see, that is the only way that you will have an answer in all of this. And for reasons best known to yourself, actually speaking to him, actually asking outright, is something that you have avoided more than once since you have been married. But I cannot help saying that it is surely the most sensible and practical path to take in all of this. If you do not ask him, you are simply flailing around blind, are you not?"

"You are always so sensible, Esme. And I know that it is right; I know that *that* is what I must do. But it is so very difficult to make such an approach to Elliot for he is such a quiet man. I cannot help thinking that having spent so many years alone, he is much used to keeping his

own counsel on so many issues. I am perpetually worried that if I persist, I am doing nothing more than taking his silence away, depriving him of it almost."

"I have no doubt that *that* is a very distinct possibility for a man who has been alone for so long. But just because he is used to his silence and solitude does not mean that he enjoys it. It is a habit and very likely follows the path of most habits. Neither enjoyable nor breakable without assistance."

"I wish I could feel your confidence, Esme," Isabella said with a sigh.

"Do not be fooled by my confidence, my dear. After all, it is very easy to talk with confidence upon somebody else's situation, is it not?" Esme gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"Oh, Esme, you do lighten my mood."

"That is what friends are for, are they not?"

"I daresay it is, and I must tell you that I greatly look forward to the day when I can return the favour. For now, it seems that the tide flows only from you to me."

"That is by necessity, Isabella, not design." Esme picked up her tea again and sipped it, despite the fact that it had cooled considerably.

“Forgive me for being so forward, Isabella, but there is something that I must say. Or ask; I am not sure which.”

“You may speak freely, Esme.” Isabella smiled at her friend reassuringly.

“You are now in love with your husband, are you not?”

“Yes, I truly believe that I am in love with Elliot.”

“And have you looked upon his face properly since we last spoke of it? Have you made it your business to do so?”

“I have tried, but Elliot is still so private on the matter. Even on that evening when we were so close, Elliot stood behind me. He is always behind me when we play music. And even when he came down to escort me out of the carriage to go to my mother’s funeral; he already had that hood of his in place. He did not wait until he got into the carriage but hid from me immediately. I cannot help thinking that it is *me* he hides from more than anybody.”

“I cannot see that is entirely true, although there may be *some* truth in it. You forget; I stood with your husband whilst you spoke to your father after the funeral service, and I saw what he suffered in those moments. Much apart from trying to give an ear to the conversation you were having with your father, the Duke had to deal with the

stares and the whispers all around him. And the whispers became louder and louder as everybody grew in confidence. Safety in numbers, I suppose, and the fact that small mobs of people always seem to think as one."

"Oh dear, did he really suffer so much? I did see some surreptitious glances throughout the ceremony and saw even more obvious ones just afterward. But I must admit, once I realized that my father wanted to speak to me, everything else became forgotten."

"Well, he really did suffer, Isabella. He suffered in a way which made me furious, made me want to speak out loud and tell them off for their stupidity. For heaven's sake, it's just a scar. It is not a contagion, it is not a blight on the soul, it is not a description of the man beneath. It is just ruined skin, and nothing else. And they did not even see that much, did they? They saw only a hood covering it all. Would they be so excited at the sight of a hat, I wonder? Or a new pair of breeches?" Esme grinned.

"You make the world seem so very simple," Isabella said sadly.

"Because I do believe that sometimes the world is as simple as you make it. Listen, we do not always have control over our destinies, especially as women. But when we *do* have the opportunity to accept things and to make things our own, we must take those opportunities. We must not sit and wonder how everything will go wrong when

there is a chance that everything will go right. We must not dwell upon the look of a thing or the opinions of others when there is a life to be lived. And I believe that there is a life to be lived for you here at Coldwell Hall, a good life for both you and the Duke. Now, why on earth would the two of you not take an opportunity like that in both hands and run as fast as you can with it? Really, it makes no sense." Esme laughed.

"I do so love you, Esme. You are so bossy, and yet I love you all the more for it."

"Then you must do as I say and make the best of things. The more you make the best things, the more you realize that you already *have* the best of things. Does that make any sense at all?"

"It makes perfect sense."

Chapter 29

“Are you not going to play?” Elliot’s voice behind her made Isabella turn suddenly on the piano stool.

She had been sitting there for almost an hour without moving, just looking down at the keys and wondering how she would best follow Esme’s advice.

It was another evening without Elliot’s presence, and she could see no reason to play any of the tunes she had come to love so dearly. It was not the same without him, and she knew it.

“I could not think of anything to play,” she said and knew that it was only partly the truth.

“Perhaps you could pay the Haydn again? I think it is one of my favourite pieces, but only when I hear you play it.” There was a quality to his voice that was almost sad, and its presence made her feel sad also.

“I will play it if you wish. Will you not join me? Do you not have your violin with you?”

“I do not have it with me,” he said plainly and began to walk into the

room.

He crossed to the armchair he almost always sat in and perched in front of the fire. Night after night, Isabella had been careful to make no changes to the lighting in the room. Always she only had the fire lit and the candles of the candelabra which sat on top of her piano. She did not want to do anything which would put him off coming in to see her, to spend time with her.

Isabella had a feeling of foreboding, a feeling that things were not quite right. She felt sad and knew that he did too as if everything was somehow coming to an end. Quite why she felt that way, she did not know and hoped that it was nothing more than a vivid imagination born of days of silence.

With no idea of how to continue their conversation, Isabella could do nothing but play the piano. But she did not play to please him, nor anybody else. She did what he had always talked about and played for the sake of the music itself. She played for the enjoyment of the music, even if to do so made her feel so terribly sad.

And the result was quite miraculous. Isabella had not bothered to rise from the piano stool and lift its lid to find the correct piece of sheet music so that she might follow it. Instead, she closed her eyes and played by instinct. She had played the piece so many times, practiced it so very diligently that there was not a single part of the melody that

she did not know by heart. And as for the keys, she felt her way, seeing nothing through her closed eyes but the orange glow of the dancing flames of the candles.

When she had finished, the room fell into silence. She peered across the room into the gloom and felt sure that she had seen Elliot raise a hand to his eye momentarily. Had he dashed away a tear without realizing that he was being watched? And if so, why?

“You liked the piece?” she said, finally breaking the silence.

“I do not think I have ever heard anything played so beautifully, Isabella.”

“You are too kind.”

“No, I am simply being truthful. If either one of us is kind, it is you.”

“Elliot, is something wrong? I cannot help thinking that I have done or said something that has somehow changed your opinion of me.”

“My opinion of you could not be higher, Isabella, and nothing could change it.”

“Not even a murderous streak running through my family? Running through my very veins, even?”

“I do not believe that you have been touched by a murderous streak, Isabella. And evil does not run through your veins. Not you of all people in this world.”

“But something has turned you against me, Elliot. I know it; I can feel it.”

“I am not turned against you, Isabella. I would never be turned against you.”

“Then things are as they always were, are they?”

“Insofar as my feelings for you, yes, things are as they always were.”

“Then there is something else, is there not?”

“My feelings towards myself are not as they were.”

“Then you no longer shroud yourself in guilt?”

“If you are talking about my family, perhaps I shall always shroud myself in guilt.”

“On this occasion, I was not talking about your family, forgive me. But once when we spoke, you told me that you felt guilty about the

manner of our marrying. And I told you then, I told you most distinctly, that I did not think any the less of you for it now that I had come to know you. I would wish for nothing more than the ability to make you see. But it appears that I cannot, whatever I say, and whatever I do. You are quite determined to blame yourself, and yet you do not see that I have a better life now than ever I did."

"A better life without your father in it?"

"Quite so."

"Because he was a monster?"

"Yes, of course, he was a monster. I have now told you everything there is to tell of him, and surely you can see now that a monster is exactly what he always was."

"So, anything would be an improvement on that, would it not?" he spoke a little sullenly.

"Goodness me, you think that I see you as nothing more than a vague improvement on a truly disastrous existence?" Isabella felt suddenly and inexplicably angry.

"Am I not?"

“You speak as if it must be either one thing or the other. You talk as if I am pleased only to be here because it is better than being with my father. But has it has not occurred to you that I am pleased to be here *simply* because *I am* pleased to be here? Is that not a possibility that also exists in a world where you seem to think there are only two choices?”

“I do not understand why it is that you always seek to excuse me. Why are you never angry about what happened to you? Why are you never distraught that your choices were taken away from you in the way that they were?”

“Because I cannot be distraught forever. I have already been distraught. I was deeply distraught at the time my choices were taken from me, and that is the truth. But I had no knowledge of what was in my future and, therefore, it was understandable that I would be distraught, was it not?”

“I daresay.”

“But as I say, I cannot continue to be distraught over something that no longer has any bearing in my world. I will not dwell on something and make it a part of the story of *me* because it is not. There is more to me as a human being than merely the girl who was sold away to the Duke who had become a myth in his own lifetime. I am not a set of circumstances; I am a person.”

“Yes, but a person who has a right to their own anger.

“And a person who also has a right to dismiss that anger when she no longer sees a use for it. I cannot dwell on things the way you do, Elliot. I cannot make the past my future, do you not see? If we all lived as you do, none of us would ever move forward. We would live only in the past, we would live it over and over, and we would never reconcile the feelings that came with it. The past is the past for a reason. If it were not so, the past would be called the present, would it not? Or even the future, perhaps?”

“You are being a little more argumentative than I had given you credit for,” Elliot said sharply.

“Well, I must always argue against irrationality when I see it.”

“You think it irrational of me to still have my feelings laid waste by the loss of my mother and sister?”

“You are now twisting my words to fit your own mood, Elliot.”

“Perhaps I am. Forgive me.” He turned to silently stare into the fire, the handsome side of his face clearly defined in the orange glow.

As he sat silently, clearly determined not to look back towards her,

Isabella maintained the surveillance of him. She would not look away, nor would she give up. She did not know what mood had overtaken Elliot, nor the cause of it. Worse still, she did not know where that mood would take him; where it would all end.

“Elliot, what is all of this? What have I done?”

“As I said before, you have done nothing.”

“Then this is your own mood? Your own feeling?”

“Yes, feelings which will not be denied, I am afraid.”

“I do not understand.”

“Tell me, what did you used to do in the outside world?”

“That is a peculiar question,” she said quizzically.

“You must have done something. You must have played bridge and attended afternoon teas and evening buffets. You must have spent time in London, watched plays, enjoyed Christmas celebrations. Tell me.”

“Yes, I did many of those things. I used to play bridge every Thursday at the home of Lady Brockett. It was a very well attended affair week

in week out." Isabella smiled at the memory of it.

She had always enjoyed Thursday afternoon bridge in Lady Brockett's home, always teaming up with Esme since they made such a formidable pair. And there was always fun and gossip to be had, albeit of the most benign variety.

"And what of evening events? What of the society you used to keep back then?" He seemed genuinely interested, and Isabella wondered if they were slowly walking back towards the right track again.

"There would be two or three events every week. As you say, evening buffets and afternoon teas. I daresay that I had a very vast array of society at my disposal, given that my father is the Earl of Upperton. My mother and I were invited all over the place,and we generally accepted invitations."

"And did you make many invitations?"

"Oh yes, of course," Isabella said and laughed lightly. "My mother was very fond of laying on afternoon tea. She was most lavish about it all, perhaps even showing off just a little. Still, my father was rarely in company with us at the time. He always seemed to be somewhere on the estate bellowing at somebody, a tenant farmer or servant. Anyway, the point is that he was always otherwise engaged, and so I suppose, when I think of it, our little afternoon events were always

quite carefree. Or they were what passed for carefree at Upperton Hall."

"It is hard to imagine that you ever had any joy in that house," Elliot said suddenly.

"In truth, I had not remembered any of it until my mother's passing. She was not a kind and loving woman towards me, and that is the truth. But there was a little sympathy between us, perhaps of humour and conversation. We seemed to work well together for our afternoon teas, and as I have said, it was something that I had forgotten until these last few days."

"Perhaps the pain and injustice of it all mask the good at times."

"Yes, I believe that is true. Just because I did not have what I truly wanted from my mother does not mean that I did not have anything good from her. I suppose there is a lesson in there for me, is there not?"

"I think you have been presented with far too many lessons for one lifetime, Isabella. You need not search for more of them; I am sure of it."

"Perhaps we have both been presented with far too many lessons."

“And what of London?” He seemed determined to continue, to find out more about her somehow.

“I have attended several events in the season but have never played out an entire season in London, if you will. I avoided it. I always gave my mother little hints and excuses for us not to attend it all.”

“Why was that?”

“Because the London season is designed for one thing and one thing only. It is a parade ground where young ladies are trotted out like show ponies to be looked over and finally chosen, or *not* chosen, as the case may be.”

“Yes, I believe it is renowned as a market for marriage above all things.”

“You never went yourself?”

“My mother talked of it often, trying to edge me this way and that to find a bride.” He laughed warmly. “But she did not push too hard and, after my father passed, she was more concerned that I find a lady to love and like rather than a lady who was deemed suitable. She was no longer interested in any sort of strategic marriage because you see, she had not suffered such a thing herself. My father and mother were genuinely suited and had, in the end, actually chosen one another.”

“How wonderful,” Isabella said on a wave of romance. “Then it is little wonder you were such a close family.”

“Perhaps it is the only way to have a close family.”

“Perhaps it is,” she agreed.

“Then you can see now why I have such concerns, can you not?”

“Why?” she said a little upended. “What concerns?”

“We did not choose one another, did we?”

“Our circumstances were a little different, it is true.” Isabella was desperately trying to remember Esme’s wise words.

She felt sure that if she could only remember them and repeat them, they would make great sense, and Elliot would finally see the truth of it all. But for the life of her, Isabella could not draw them to mind. She knew the essence of them but could find no way to speak them aloud.

“I have kept you prisoner here against your will, Isabella, and nothing you say will change that. It is a fact, plain and simple.”

“How am I a prisoner here when I am free to make my visits and to

have visitors? It does not make sense." She had that awful sense that the conversation was slipping out of her grasp once more.

"Because you do not go anywhere. Granted you visit Esme in her home, but that is it. You do not go to bridge, you do not go to afternoon teas, and you certainly do not go to London or to see theatricals or partake of any other of life's enjoyments."

"Because I would rather you went with me," she said truthfully.

"But I cannot go with you, Isabella. And that is how I keep you prisoner. You are too good of a person to go out into the world and continue to take on its enjoyments because you see me as your responsibility."

"Elliot, I did not see you in that way at all."

"Object all you like, Isabella, I know it to be true. You no longer have your father's firm hand pressing down upon you, and it is clear to you now that I do not object to you living a life. But you have chosen not to live it. You have made yourself content to spend a few hours in the evening with me, to live in the same shadows that I live in. But that is wrong, can you not see it? Can you not see what I have imposed upon you simply by gaining your sympathy?"

"You asked me never to pity you, and I swear to you that I do not,"

she said firmly.

“I know that you do not pity me, and I thank you for it. But I know that I have your sympathy, and I have your care. Whilst that ought to be a source of great joy to me, it is instead a source of great sadness. Even if you have forgiven me for the manner in which you came to be here, how can you continue to forgive me for keeping you here in the shadows? You are but twenty years old.”

“Elliot, I cannot bear this conversation a moment longer.”

“Please forgive me,” he said and began to rise to his feet.

“And once again you are to walk away. Why? Why do you do that?”

“Habit, I daresay.”

“And staying in the shadows is a habit, Elliot. A habit which might be broken with a little help. Why will you not accept my help?”

“Good night, Isabella.”

“No, Elliot!” she said and made to rise.

However, he was already out of the room and had disappeared out of sight before she had made her way into the corridor.

Chapter 30

Isabella had not slept a wink. She ran over every element of their conversation in her mind as she stared blindly into the darkness of her room. Had Elliot realized that she had great plans to introduce him to the world outside again? Had that been what had somehow changed things for him?

But they were married, and there was time to put things right, surely.

As the day began to break, Isabella sat up in her bed and stared miserably around the room. Try as she might, she could not shake the feeling that there was something so very final about the conversation. It had struck her almost as if Elliot was saying goodbye to her. But how could he be saying goodbye to her? They were man and wife.

Suddenly, she was reminded of the idea she had once had that they could live out their lives without setting eyes on one another ever again as they walked the halls of Coldwell. But surely that had been nothing more than a fanciful dread. If she wanted to find him, by day or by night, surely, she could. Could she not?

And yet there it was; the feeling that would not go away. Oh, how she wished she had Esme with her at that moment. Esme would know what to say to make things right. She would remind her of her clever

words, words that could not be argued with.

Isabella waited in silence for what seemed like forever until Kitty came with her jug of warm water. As she dressed, she knew that she must do something. She must make some move or other, not just wait for life to roll on in a direction she had not wanted or expected. For once, Isabella really must take charge of things.

“Kitty, do you know if Crawford Maguire is here today?”

“I should think so, Your Grace. He stayed last night, certainly, and I believe he is on some matter of business for His Grace. I have no doubt that you will find him in his study today, likely for the next few days if I know anything about it.”

“Oh, good,” Isabella said and felt suddenly that she would have some chance of getting answers.

“Forgive me, but is something troubling you?” Kitty spoke gently.

“It really is, Kitty. I am so worried about the Duke at the moment. He seems to have changed, to have retreated into his little world again. And the thing is, I am worried that he will not come out of his world anymore.”

“And you would miss him?”

“Kitty, I would miss him more than anything.”

“Then I think it is time that you told him as much,” Kitty said reticently.

“Do you really?”

“Forgive me for speaking so plainly, Your Grace.”

“No, Kitty, you must speak freely before me. Of all people, you must speak freely, for if you do not, how am I ever to know how to proceed?” Isabella felt tearful but was determined not to cry. “Nobody else speaks plainly to me here, Kitty. Least of all my husband.”

“I think if you do care for the Duke, you must tell him. It is what has been missing in his world for so many years. Yes, he has me to help him, but I am not in a position to outright say that I care. And as for Crawford Maguire, whilst his actions are most kindly, he is a friend and a man, and he cannot speak the same words. And from all you have told me, these are words that you have not heard a good deal of in your life. It is time that you and His Grace were open with one another. Forgive me, but I cannot help feeling that it is the only way to keep moving forward.”

“Not only do you know the Duke better than most, but it would seem

that you know me better also. You have been a great comfort to me, Kitty, and I shall never forget it."

"Now don't you start weeping, Your Grace or I shall follow suit and will get nothing done today," Kitty said and blinked hard.

"Oh, Kitty!" Isabella said and laughed and cried all at once.

"You must be brave, my dear." Kitty suddenly took her hands in her own. "You must be brave enough to look upon his face and tell him everything that is in your heart. But you must do both of those things, not just one or the other. The Duke needs to hear all of it, and he needs to know that it is true."

"And I will do it; I will tell him everything."

"You will get used to his appearance in time. That is all that it takes, believe me."

"I think I could more easily get used to his appearance than to his lack of presence. That, above all things, I cannot bear."

"Then you must tell him."

"I shall. But first, I shall speak with Crawford Maguire and see if he knows anything of the Duke's curious mood at the moment. I ought to

be armed with all the information, ought I not?"

"That sounds like a most sensible decision, Your Grace." Kitty smiled approvingly.

Within the hour, Isabella had dressed and eaten a small breakfast, finding herself unable to eat as heartily as she ordinarily did first thing in the morning.

Determining that she would eat a little better at luncheon, Isabella hurriedly made her way to Crawford Maguire's study and knocked the door.

As always, Crawford rose to his feet and opened the door himself and, seeing Isabella standing there, smiled warmly.

"Come in, Isabella. Do take a seat." He ushered her into one of the armchairs by the fire.

"Thank you, Crawford," Isabella said as she sat down."Forgive me for intruding upon what looks to be a very busy morning." Isabella turned to indicate a mountain of papers on Crawford's desk.

"Not at all." She could see Crawford's expression become one of awkwardness as he regarded the papers.

In her heart, she knew the papers had something to do with her.

“Forgive me, Crawford, but whatever is happening, I must know.”

“I beg your pardon?” She knew he was playing for time.

“Crawford, I know that something has changed, although I do not know what it is. And yet I cannot help thinking that my husband came to see me last night to say goodbye. I know that will sound like a most curious assertion, but it is true, and I cannot think of another way to describe it.”

“Oh, Isabella.” Crawford let out a great sigh and looked as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“There really is something, is there not? Will you not tell me, Crawford? Honestly, I cannot manage with all this uncertainty and sadness.”

“Then you *are* sad, Isabella?”

“Of course, I am; of course, I am!” She instantly regretted her tone. “Forgive me, I did not mean to speak so sharply.”

“I cannot blame you for speaking so. It is clear to me now that you are suffering the most dreadful confusion, and I can do no other than seek

to clear it for you."

"I would be most grateful, Crawford. I am in the dark more often than my husband these days."

"There is no easy way for me to tell you this, so I must just give you the facts. And please understand, Isabella, that I have tried my hardest to dissuade the Duke from this particular course of action."

"What course of action?" Isabella began to feel afraid.

"The Duke has decided to seek an annulment of your marriage."

"An annulment?" Isabella almost shrieked the word.

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"But why? Why would he do such a thing to me? What have I done to deserve such treatment?"

"He seeks to do it in a manner in which you will not suffer, Isabella."

"How could I not suffer? How could I be anything other than a pariah in society, cast out by my own husband?" Her hands were shaking violently, and she felt nauseous.

“He does not seek to achieve it in a manner which would have you cast out. That is why he has asked for my help; he needs to find a way in which it can be achieved without any harm to you whatsoever.”

“I do not understand.”

“There is a means of achieving it which would have no villain in the piece but your father.” Crawford looked down as if he had somehow betrayed her.

“My father? But how?” Isabella did not really need the details of the thing.

It was not the fear of having society turn their backs on her when her marriage was annulled. It was the pain and heartbreak that the only man she had ever truly loved would be the one to turn his back.

“There are not, as you know, many circumstances in which an annulment can be obtained,” Crawford began and seemed to be on firmer ground now that he was explaining the mechanics of it all. “Mental incompetence is one, of course, but not one that is advisable to pursue.”

“Good, because I am not mentally incompetent in any way!” Isabella felt defensive.

“Not you, Isabella. Elliot would never say such a thing about you. He initially meant to take that on himself, giving you the authority to claim it.”

“Well, I would never claim such a thing about Elliot either, so it will not work.”

“Not only that, but women who claim that their husbands are mentally incompetent do not fare very well in society. When I explained this to Elliot, he would not have it that way either. And so, we have fallen upon the idea of fraud.”

“Fraud?” Isabella was utterly dumbfounded.

“Which can be a number of things,” Crawford continued. “It could be a case of fraudulent identity.”

“But neither one of us has claimed an identity which is not our own.”

“Quite so. All that is left is to suggest that your father did not settle upon you in the sum that he had promised to before you were married to Elliot.”

“But there was no settlement from my father. He did not promise any money at all.”

“Which is a most unusual set of circumstances, and one which would work in our favour. There is nothing formal by way of agreement between your father and Elliot, another point in our favour. It would be an easy thing for Elliot to claim that your father had promised a sum of money because he can prove that your father has never paid him ever. And in such circumstances, the marriage could be annulled on the case of fraud. The only person who would suffer for it would be your father. And only in terms of his reputation. And you would be well provided for. You would have money and property of your own which you father could not touch. Elliot is most firm upon that point.”

“Whilst I cannot claim to care very much what becomes of my father and his reputation, there is so much more to this that I can hardly begin.”

“I can see that, but why not try to tell me anyway,” Crawford said in such a kindly way.

It struck her greatly that he wanted the best for his friend, and that in doing so, what he wanted for Elliot and what Elliot wanted for himself were not always the same thing.

“I do not want my marriage annulled, Crawford. And believe me, it has nothing to do with the shame of it, especially since you claim that there would be none for either Elliot or myself to suffer. That is not my concern.”

“Then what is your concern, Isabella?”

“I did not wish to have my heart broken, Crawford. I do not wish to lose Elliot. I might not have chosen to be his wife initially, but I would not choose to be anywhere else now. If only I could find some way to make him see it. But, how can I? Now that he has chosen to dismiss me altogether, what is the point? I cannot tell him how I feel because it is clear now that he does not feel the same way.”

“I think it is quite the contrary, Isabella.”

“Then I would suggest that the evidence disproves your theory, Sir.”

“I do not think so. You see, Elliot cannot forgive himself for keeping you here. He thinks that by not going out into the world himself that he is keeping you from it.”

“I know all of this; he has told me this already, and I have told him that it is not the case. I have tried to tell him that I am quite content, and yet he will not hear it.”

“If I am honest, I think that *that* is only a very small part of it, Isabella.” Crawford looked awkward as if he was about to betray a confidence.

“What do you mean?”

“He has not told me so, but I truly think that Elliot thinks that you could never look upon him and love him.”

“But that is not true. I do love him,” Isabella said miserably.

“I do not doubt that you love him, Isabella. But you must ask yourself this; would you still love him if you looked upon him *properly?* If you looked upon him fully as you did that day in the chapel when you first met, would you still love him?”

Chapter 31

Isabella had spent the rest of the day in turmoil. She had not been able to answer Crawford's question in the end, even though she knew in her heart that she loved Elliot more than any person on earth. But she had not looked on him fully, and she knew it.

In truth, it had much to do with Elliot and his determination to hide away from her. But she had not pushed the issue for a moment, telling herself that she did not want to force him to reveal things he did not wish to reveal.

She told herself the story that it was all for his own comfort, his own peace of mind, and she had been made content by that story. She had told it to herself so many times that she had come to believe it.

The worst of it all was that she knew she no longer had any time. She had assumed, once married, they would be married forever. If it took a year or two years to come to terms with his appearance, then there would be no harm done. And if it took him equally as long to forgive himself for the manner of their matrimony, then all would be well. There had been time; there had always been time.

But there was *no* time now. She knew, of course, that an annulment would take time, but not so long that Elliot could not hide away from

her throughout. He was like a ghost to her at times, a phantom who appeared only in the dusk, seen only in the daylight from a distance or by chance. At times, he was not even real.

Oh, but he was real. And her love for him was real, she knew it. In the end, there would be nothing for it but to tell him everything that was in her heart, including all her fears. And she would look upon him as she did so, she must. Kitty had been right in that at least, and so had Esme. Elliot needed to know that she could look upon him and still love him. And not only did Elliot need to know it, but Isabella needed to know it too.

Despite having so light a breakfast, Isabella had not managed to eat anything else for the rest of the day. She had foregone luncheon, afternoon tea, and finally, dinner. She had wandered from place to place looking for him, determined to find him and stand face to face in the daylight.

She had tried his study, the library, even the ballroom. She had searched the entire ground floor of Coldwell Hall to no avail.

In the end, she had made her way upstairs and boldly marched towards the room that she had crept inside only twice before. When she reached his chamber, she knocked harshly before entering in a most abrupt manner. She looked into the room and could see only the doll on the chair and the picture of the lovely young Eleanor looking

back at her. Of Elliot Covington, there was no sign.

It was only when dusk had fallen that she thought of the tower. But surely, he would not be there in the darkness, would he? He did tell her that he walked the grounds extensively, covering mile upon mile every week. But he did not do that in the dark, she felt sure. Ordinarily, he would be making himself ready for the evening meeting, even at that moment walking down the stairs with his violin ready to enjoy himself.

When she could find him nowhere, Isabella began to grow desperate. She knew she had to find him; she had to tell him now how she felt. Throwing her shawl around her shoulders and lighting one of the oil lamps, she raced out into the darkness, heading for the tower.

The trees seemed black and foreboding at that time of night; the woodland no longer pretty or welcoming; no birdsong to keep her mind off her fear. She imagined noises everywhere, sighs and groans and the snapping of dry twigs as footsteps followed her.

She knew, of course, that she heard nothing of the sort, and that it was her mind playing tricks upon her.

By the time Isabella reached the tower, her hands were shaking violently. She had worked herself up into a most dreadful state of fear, and it was a fear that only grew as the dark shape of the tower loomed

large before her.

Isabella squinted, seeing no light coming from within. If Elliot was in, he was alone and in darkness. It did not make any sense, and yet she knew she had to know for sure; she had to look for herself.

She pulled the door towards her, and it seemed to groan in a way that she had not noticed by daylight. Perhaps her senses were keener in the dark.

“Elliot?” she called tentatively into the silence.

When the silence did not return her greeting, she shuffled into the ground floor room, careful not to catch herself on any of the debris left by the fire. The lamp shone an eerie pale light around the room, casting long shadows which made her shudder. There was no sign of him.

“Elliot?” she called again, but there was silence.

Cautiously, she made her way to the spiral stone staircase, her heart thundering as she placed a foot on the first step. There was nothing for it; she would have to go up there.

By the time she reached the next floor, her hand was shaking so badly that the light seemed to bounce off the circular walls. The silence had

quality to it, a thickness, and she knew that no living person could possibly be in that room. Holding the lamp as steady she could, she peered hard all around the room. Elliot was not there.

Feeling the hair stand up on the back of her neck, Isabella wanted nothing more than to be out of there. It was a dreadful place, not a monument to life, but a useless, ugly, shadow of death. She determined then never to set foot in that awful place again for the rest of her life.

Isabella hurried down the stairs so carelessly that she almost lost her footing. However, she made it to the bottom without injury, and it was with great relief that she flew out through the door and into the night, running as she made her way back along the pitch-black pathway with nothing more than her faltering lamplight to guide her.

By the time she reached the house again, Isabella was suffering from a dreadful array of emotions. She was devastated and heartbroken that the man she had come to love would cast her aside so easily. She was exasperated and frustrated by the fact that she could not find him anywhere and so could not put her case at all. And she was angry, so very angry that she had been left to her own devices and had found herself running, afraid and desperate, through the dark woods and into that awful tower. Above all things, she did not think that she would easily forgive Elliot for that much at least.

Grateful not to have encountered anybody on the staircase, Isabella raced to her room and closed the door behind her. It was getting late, too late for her to continue to search for him. Not only that, Isabella felt so shaken and exhausted that she could not continue.

In the end, she got herself ready for bed, climbing beneath the covers and plunging the room into darkness so that Kitty might think her fast asleep when she finally came to assist her mistress. It would not be the first time, and Kitty would see nothing unusual in it.

But Isabella could not speak, that much she knew. She would not be able to find the strength to explain it all to Kitty, to tell her everything she had learned that day and what she had done to try to find her husband. For now, she just wanted to sleep. She wanted to close her eyes and let go of it all, and that was that.

When Isabella finally woke, she could not tell how long she had been asleep. She knew from the curious silence all around that it was the dead of night. It must surely be well past midnight and, when she tiptoed through the darkness to her door and listened, she could hear nothing at all. There were no footsteps, no servants dashing around making last-minute preparations for the morning. Nothing. Everybody was asleep; she felt sure of it.

Everybody except her.

Isabella knew that it would not do. She could not stay there any longer, could not lay awake in her bed until the sun came up the following day. She had to do it now; she had to find him.

She rose from her covers and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. She lit her lamp once more, turning it up high so that it was bright.

She had to find him; she had to know.

When she had awoken from her slumber, the fear and upset of the tower long gone, Isabella had known that this was as much about herself as it was about Elliot. She knew that Elliot was not the only one with fears, and she knew she must face her own there and then. After all, how could she claim to love him if she could not look upon him?

With her resolve firmer than it had ever been in her life, Isabella left her room and made haste through the corridors to the other side of Coldwell Hall. She paused only for a moment outside her husband's chamber, knowing that she could not turn back now. The rest of her life and her happiness depended on whatever happened in the next few moments; she knew it.

Without knocking, she gently opened the door. She walked quietly into the room and closed the door behind her.

As soon as she was in the room, there was light everywhere. Her lamp really was very bright, but she knew she could not turn it down. She must look at him properly, in as bright a light she could find.

“What?” Elliot stirred and sounded somewhat panicked.

He sat up in bed and shielded his eyes for a moment as he looked across the room and tried to adjust to the sudden brightness.

“Elliot, it is me. It is Isabella.” For a moment, she was rooted to the spot but knew she must go on.

There was no way for her to turn back now, and she would get what she came for; there was no other way.

“Isabella, what are you doing in here?”

“I am your wife,” she said suddenly. “Where else ought I to be really? Should I not be by your side?”

“Are you quite well?” He blinked at her and, when it was clear that she was going to continue across the room until she reached him, he held up a hand and covered his face.

“I am quite well. No, no, you must not do that.” Isabella heard

sternness in her voice which reminded her of Esme and gave her courage.

“I must not do what?” Elliot was still coming to terms with being so suddenly awake.

“You must not cover your face,” she said and finally placed the oil lamp down on the stand beside his bed.

Without another word, she perched herself on the edge of his bed and looked at him.

“You ask too much,” he said suddenly.

“Do I?” she said and shook her head. “You see, I do not think I do.”

“I do not want you to see me, Isabella. The first time you saw me was one thing, but to see you react that way now would be quite another. Too much has passed between us for me to be able to bear it.”

“And too much has passed between us for me to be able to bear you casting me aside.”

“I would not be casting you aside.”

“I would never see you again, Elliot. Do you not understand how that

would hurt me?"

"But I have found a way in which it would not hurt you; you do not understand," he said in a hurry.

"I understand perfectly. I understand the business with the fraud, and I could not care at all what becomes of my father over it. That is not my point. I am utterly furious with you that you would think that my only concern!" She reached out to grasp his wrists tightly.

"Let go, Isabella," he said firmly.

"No," she said with equal determination.

For some minutes, they sat staring at each other whilst Elliot did what he could to cover his face. In the end, he forcefully pushed her hands away and grabbed her wrists instead. At that moment, his face was uncovered entirely, and Isabella found herself staring at him, their noses but an inch apart.

"Well, is this what you wanted?" he said angrily.

"Yes, it is exactly what I wanted," she replied and smiled, despite the tears rolling down her face. "Because when I finally come to tell my husband how much I love him, I want to at least be able to see his face. I want to be able to look him in the eye, in *both* beautiful green

eyes, and tell him what is in my heart."

"And you can do it without fainting?" he said incredulously.

"As you see me," she responded, her smile broader still.

"Isabella, I have come to love you with all my heart, and I know that I could not bear to love so much when that love could not be returned."

"But that love *is* returned, Elliot. I love you with all my heart also."

"And that is what is in your heart? That is what you had come to tell me?"

"I had come to look upon you and tell you that I love you. I had to know for myself, but you have hidden from me all these months, and it has been impossible to set aside my own ridiculous fears. But now they are gone; they are swept away." She continued to smile at him, and finally, he released his tight grip on her wrists.

The moment she was released, Isabella reached up by instinct and placed a hand on either side of his face. The difference was clear, one side so smooth and the other so puckered and rough. But both sides were her husband, with not a thing to choose between them.

Familiarity was not going to come with the difficulties that she had

expected. In the end, Crawford Maguire had been absolutely right.

As Isabella continued to explore Elliot's face with her fingers, he studied her. She looked into his eyes, and she could see as much love in them for her as she held in her heart for him.

She had never thought that she would be so filled with joy because the monster of her childish stories had not only captured her body but had captured her heart also. How glad she was not to have escaped, not to be living with some distant, kindly old aunt in Ireland. This was where she was always meant to come, that much she knew.

How could her father have known all those months ago what kindness he was doing her in leading her finally to the only man she could ever love? How could he have known that his cynical act of greed and his indifference towards his own daughter could have produced the most miraculous result? Isabella was truly in love, and she was loved in return. She had never thought she would ever feel such intense emotion in all her life, and yet there she was almost overcome with it all.

Without a word, Elliot reached out and pulled her towards him. When his lips finally touched hers and his roughened skin touched the smooth skin of her face, she did not recoil. It did not feel strange or unpleasant, rather it felt right. It felt as if it was always to have been that way, and she knew in her heart that it always would.

Epilogue

“I can hardly believe that you are soon to be married, Esme. I do hope that Rupert understands perfectly that he will see almost as much of me as he sees of his new wife,” Isabella said with gentle forthrightness.

“I have made it a condition of my agreements to marry him,” Esme said and laughed. “And Rupert knows he ought not to attempt to come between us, my dear Isabella. So, you have no need to worry about it.”

“I cannot imagine that the poor man would dare attempt it,” Elliot said with a laugh as he reached out to lay his cup and saucer back on the tea tray.

“Quite so, Your Grace,” Esme said with a bold smile. “More tea?” She raised her eyebrows at him as she looked into his face.

As Isabella watched her friend and her husband in conversation, she reflected upon the fact that Esme had never once blanched at Elliot’s appearance. From the first time he had come out into Esme’s company almost two years before without his curious hood, Esme had treated him as an old friend.

She had never stared and, equally, she had never avoided looking at him either. Esme really was the most marvelous friend, and she had, just as she had always wanted, made Elliot as much a friend of hers as Isabella was.

And she had been instrumental in Elliot's return to the world. Esme's easy manner and determination had seen many others in their close society follow suit and determinedly admit the Duke of Coldwell into their circle.

With Esme Montague as their example, they had tried to emulate her ways to behave in a most natural manner for as long as it took them to overcome their own consternation. And when it had been overcome, it was clear.

Just as Crawford Maguire had always said, it was a matter of familiarity and nothing more. And Elliot was doing everything he could to make himself a familiar figure in the county.

At first, it had not been easy. Of course, Isabella had always known how hard it would be for him to take those first steps back to life again.

But it had not been quite as hard for Elliot as it had been all those years ago when he had been alone. He had a wife by his side, one who loved him and did not shriek or look away. Rather she looked at him,

touched him, kissed him. She told him she loved him every day, and he knew in his heart that she was as attracted to him as he had always been to her. And that, he told her, had made everything much easier.

He already had what he wanted more than anything. He already had a wife he loved and who loved him in return. Society could choose to accept him or not, as was their wish. And if they chose not to accept him, it mattered not, for he was already accepted by Isabella.

Over time, the small circle of society had grown, little by little. And Isabella was amazed by the amount of people who, in the end, were far more swayed by the title of Duke than by the scarring. How little it took for shallowness to be tipped from one end of the scale to the other! And how very amusing.

Still, even the shallowness made things easier for him.

But the thing that had finally pushed him out into the world had been the one thing he had never expected to have. A beautiful daughter.

When Isabella had first told him that she was with child, not weeks after they had first been reconciled to a true marriage, a true life together, Elliot had felt excitement the first time in almost twenty years.

Life was coming, a new life, with new hope for the future. It had

enabled him to finally let go, not of Eleanor and his mother exactly, but of the guilt he had suffered for so long. Little by little, Isabella had managed to convince him that the guilt stood in the way of the grieving. And the guilt, he soon came to know, was unjustified. It had no place in his world, and neither Eleanor nor his mother could have stood to watch it.

In the end, Elliot had chosen to have the tower destroyed. He had kept it as a memorial for so long, and yet it had never served its purpose. It was not a place of remembrance, not a place to celebrate the lives of those he had lost. It was a dark place filled with too many anguished, painful memories. As much as his sister had loved the tower, in the end, it had served as a place of fear and pain, and he knew the time had come to let it go.

Before Isabella's pregnancy had even begun to show, Elliot had pulled the tower to the ground. He did not want his child to fall in love with the building and to make it their own as his sister had done. He wanted his child to find contentment and fantasy anywhere but there. It had come as a great relief to Isabella when the tower had finally come down, even though there was much sadness attached to the deed itself.

But it was a sign for her that her husband, the man she loved so dearly, was finally beginning to live his life free from the shadows which had held him so tightly and for so long.

As Isabella had wandered the house and grounds, growing larger by the day, she had been surprised at how his constant company made every day exciting and new.

They walked together and spent time in the little walled gardens. They played music together every day, and Elliot's attempts to teach Isabella to play the violin had not been without their rewards. Isabella had taken to the instrument with ease and spent many hours in happy practice.

When Catherine had finally been born, it seemed to Isabella that Elliot's world was now complete. His happiness at the appearance of his baby daughter touched her more than anything had done in her life before. He loved his little girl instantly, taking her everywhere with him.

As Catherine began to grow and become more inquisitive and mobile, she often stared at her father with adoring eyes and reached out with chubby hands to grasp his cheeks. It made no difference to the infant that her father had scars. It was clear that Catherine, as a baby, had never even noticed. He was her father, and that was that. He was the man who would love and protect her for her entire life.

It was about that time that Elliot had surprised Isabella by accepting an invitation to a county ball being held by Lord and Lady Tavistock.

It was to be a large and lavish affair, and Isabella had thought it would likely be just a little too large and overcrowded for her husband's liking. She knew that they needed to take things little by little, without pushing.

"Are you quite sure, Elliot?" Isabella had said when Elliot told her that he had accepted the invitation.

"I would be a fool not to go out into the world, would I not? When a man has a beautiful wife and daughter who love him and look upon him without fear or disgust, then he has everything in the world that he needs. Believe me; once a man has that, he can do anything."

His happy smile and bold assertion had reduced Isabella to tears of pride and happiness on the spot, and Elliot had teased her greatly for it for days afterward. But he had teased her kindly, knowing how much his wife had wanted him to have the life which seemed to have been stolen from him all those years ago. He knew what it meant to her.

"Yes, I should like another cup of tea, Esme." As Esme poured the tea, Isabella was drawn back into the present moment.

"Are Catherine and Kitty still outside?" Isabella said vaguely. "I do hope our child is not wearing Kitty out."

“I do not think there is much chance of that, my dear,” Elliot said and laughed as he looked over his shoulder and out of the large French windows onto the terrace beneath. “If anything, I think Kitty would be loath to give up her new responsibilities.”

“I should say so.” Isabella laughed.

“I do not know how that dear woman manages to be your personal maid, Isabella, and nurse your child.” Esme shook her head in admiration.

“It is determination, Esme. It is determination to be a great part of Catherine’s life, and the child was born just minutes before Kitty had offered herself up as the role of nurse. How on earth could I have refused her?”

“And she is a very good nurse, is she not?”

“She truly can turn her hand to anything. The fact that she loves Catherine dearly helps.”

“And her duties as lady’s maid?”

“As you know, I can already look after myself very well indeed.” Isabella laughed. “And the larger part of Kitty’s duties have always been more as counsellor and companion to me than as a lady’s maid.

It is very fluid."

"I just hope that Kitty will accept help when the second one is born," Elliot said, and Isabella drew in her breath sharply.

"Second one?" Esme said sitting suddenly bolt upright. "Is there something you ought to tell me, Isabella?" Esme's eyes were already bright and shining; she knew the answer to her own question.

"I had hoped to tell you myself," she said casting a mock annoyed glance at her husband who, for his part, looked suitably chagrined.

"I really am terribly sorry; it just slipped out." He shrugged.

"It slipped out because you are just so excited, my dear, are you not?" Isabella laughed and reached for his hand.

"I am excited, it is true. And this is not the first time that I have forgotten myself, I am afraid."

"Let me hazard a guess and say that you have already told Crawford." Isabella was still laughing.

"It just happened, my dear." He shrugged again only with more gusto this time. "And then, of course, I had to hurriedly let him know that he and his lovely new wife were not expected to be godparents to our

second child also. I told him that he could relax safe in the knowledge that Esme and Rupert would be…" He winced. "Sorry."

"Esme, forgive me. If I had realized that my husband would turn from hermit to social butterfly in a heartbeat, I would have come here today without him. Truly, I had wanted to ask you for myself."

"My dear, are you asking me to be godmother to your new child?" Esme was already dabbing at the corner of her eye with a handkerchief.

"Yes, just that. I should like you and Rupert to be our new child's godparents when he or she comes into the world. As long as both you and Rupert are agreeable, that is."

"We shall be married by then, my dear, and Rupert will be agreeable whether he is agreeable or not."

"Dear me, poor old Rupert," Elliot said and gave Esme a teasing smile. "It is probably best that he does not yet know all that is to come to him."

"Quite so, quite so." Esme nodded slowly and smiled. "After all, I do not want him to run away to Liverpool and take a boat to Ireland before I have even had a chance to marry him."

All three of them laughed at the humorous allusion to Isabella's daring attempt at escape in the weeks before she had been due to marry Elliot.

"I am teasing you, of course. Dear old Rupert is a very lucky man, and I should never hear it said otherwise," Elliot said seriously. "And he is due to have a most interesting and fulfilling married life, of that I am certain."

"Between your kindness and the knowledge that I am to be a godmother, I am sure that I shall spend the rest of this day in happy tears. Now then, you really must stop it before I wash myself away."

As Esme and Elliot continued to chatter happily, Isabella stared out through the French windows to where Kitty was desperately trying to keep up with the faltering but surprisingly speedy steps of baby Catherine.

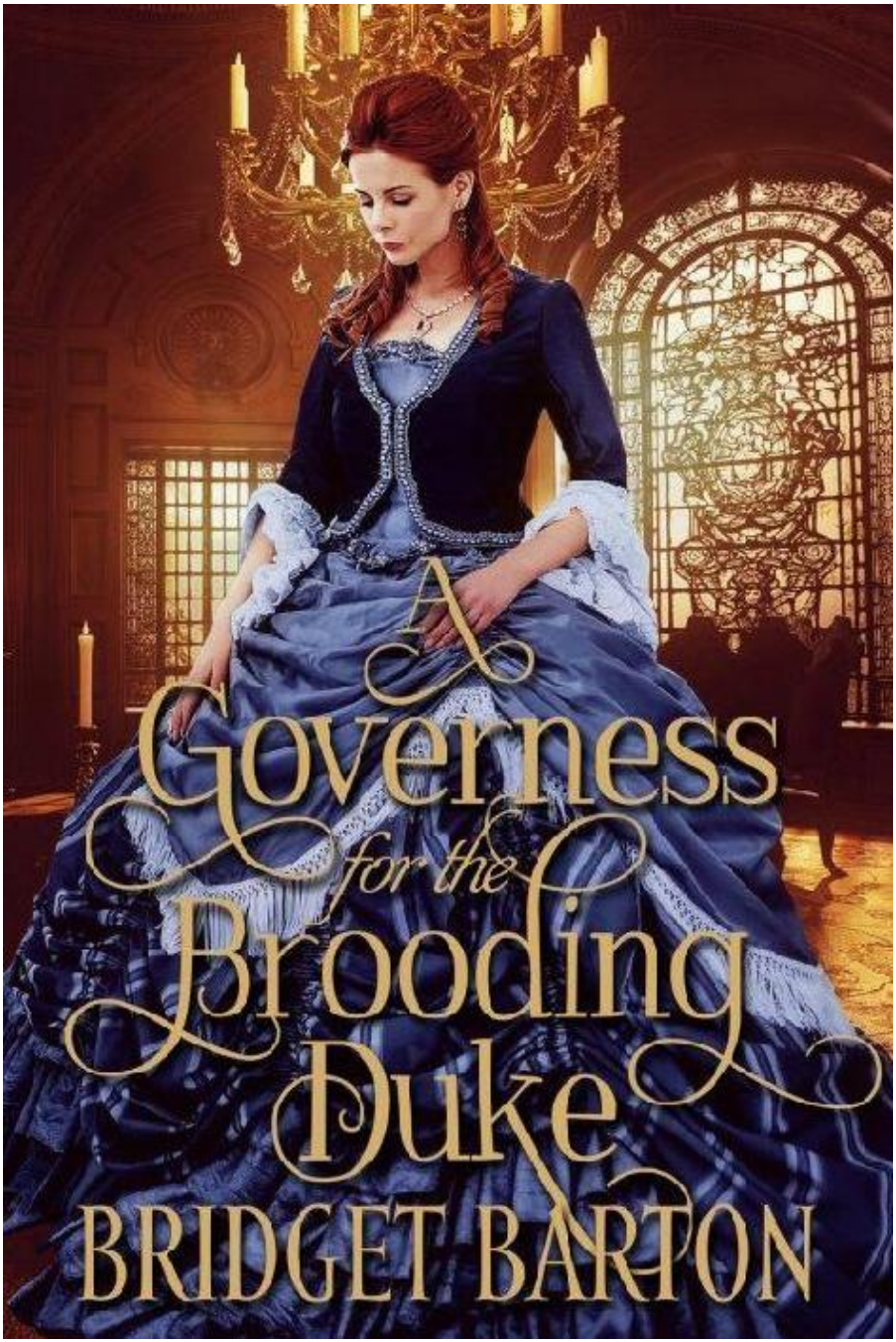
She smiled and blinked back a few happy tears of her own. Everything that Isabella had ever wanted in the world was there before her at that moment. She had a loving husband who was kind, amusing, intelligent, and very handsome. She had a beautiful child and another on the way. And to add to it all, Isabella had the promise of her oldest friend at her side for the rest of her life.

And with Kitty as the mother figure she had never truly known,

Isabella knew that her life was complete. Of course, ups and downs would come as they surely did to everybody, but the foundations of her world were the strongest that she could ever have imagined, and for that she was truly grateful.

THE END

(Please turn the page to read the first chapters from "A Governess for the Brooding Duke", my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)


A
Governess
for the
Brooding
Duke
BRIDGET BARTON

A Governess for the Brooding Duke

Introduction

When Georgette Darrington's father dies suddenly and with serious debts, she imagines things cannot get any worse. But when her attorney tells her that the family home must be sold to pay the debts, leaving her penniless and without a home, her only choice is to become a governess.

In no time at all, Georgette finds herself in the grand mansion of the Duke of Draycott, teaching his delightful, orphaned nieces. But, the more time Georgette spends with the little girls, the more she realizes they are missing their home and life in Wales, not to mention their own language.

Georgette must find a way to convince the Duke to take an interest in the girls' lives, and she must also find a way to keep their native language alive despite his determined instructions to the contrary.

As the tragic tale of the Duke's sister and her forbidden love unfolds, Georgette must struggle with the deprivations of her lowered status, not to mention the spiteful plots and schemes of a jealous housekeeper and nurse.

As her loneliness threatens to overwhelm her, Georgette must find a way put the splintered family back together, even as she battles her own feelings of love for the handsome, taciturn Duke.

Chapter 1

“Are you telling me, Mr. Wharton, that there is really nothing at all? My father left me nothing?” Georgette Darrington was so shocked that she felt nauseous.

“I am afraid not, Miss Darrington. It is not that he chose to leave you nothing, my dear. Rather the sale of the house will barely cover the debts he accrued in his lifetime. In truth, he has made it clear that you shall be the sole beneficiary of whatever the residue is after the debts are cleared. Unfortunately, there is no residue.”

“But he will have known this, Mr. Wharton. My father would have been very well aware of the size of his debts and the value of his house. He would have known very well that he was leaving me destitute, and yet he chose to say nothing. He chose to give me not one moment’s grace to gather my thoughts and work out what I ought to do next.”

“I daresay things feel awfully raw at the moment, Miss Darrington. It is only a week since you buried your father, and this must be a most distressing time for you.” Mr. Wharton delivered what Georgette thought was truly the biggest understatement she had ever heard.

Georgette had mourned her father as much as it was possible for her to do given the relationship they had. His passing had distressed her and had rather given her the feeling of being an orphan, despite being almost one and twenty years of age.

The reading of the will, however, was truly equally as distressing. In many ways, more so, because it was tinged with fear. Of course, when the reality of it finally settled itself within her mind, Georgette Darrington knew that she would no longer be simply afraid but would be rather terrified. Because, if what the attorney was telling her was absolutely true, then she was not simply homeless, but also penniless.

“Raw?” Georgette said, surprised by how calm her voice sounded. “Yes, I daresay.”

“And you have no family to go to?” Mr. Wharton was asking a question he already knew the answer to.

The reason Georgette Darrington was the sole heiress to her father’s estate, albeit a non-existent one, was because there were no male heirs, even in terms of extended family. In truth, Georgette was the very last of the Darringtons, and her father had no other family to speak of. If she had any relations remaining on her mother’s side, then Georgette did not know it. And, in any case, nobody, man or woman, would have inherited in Georgette’s maternal family anyway.

In truth, she rather wished that her mother had come from a bigger family. If she had, then Georgette would not be entirely alone and without options at that moment. She would have had, if nothing else, at least a few relations to whom to write and beg for shelter. And it would have been begging in every sense of the word, for it would seem that she would not even have a few pounds a year with which to keep herself. Georgette's father had spent every last penny and more besides.

Edward Darrington had neither been an easy father nor a hard one. He was simply incredibly detached from his only child, presumably disappointed that she was not a male. It had always struck her that he was further disappointed that she was the one and only child he and his wife had managed to produce in the fifteen years they shared together before Georgette's mother had died.

Whilst he had not particularly showered the motherless Georgette with affection, he had not specifically made many demands of her either. In truth, she had been rather left to go her own way and, if she was entirely honest, had quite liked it.

Georgette had not especially thought much of marriage beforehand, rather thinking herself to have a good deal of time in which to contemplate the matter. And her father, seemingly having no ambitions for her in that sense, simply left her to herself.

Edward Darrington had not urged her to find a man of wealth or title, nor even one who had neither of those things. In truth, Georgette had been quite grateful for it, for she had known many a young woman with a rather determined family forcing her into the path of a man she did not want.

“Mr. Wharton, I have no family,” Georgette said, bleakly. “I have no family; I have no money, and now I have no home. I truly have nothing, do I?” She looked up at him with sorrowful, dark brown eyes.

“Did you have no notion whatsoever of your father’s spending?” Mr. Wharton said, although his tone was in no way judgemental.

“I knew that my father liked the card tables and the drink; I just did not know how much. What I mean is, I had no idea how much he was spending on the card tables. It must have been the card tables, after all, for a man could not spend an entire house on drink and live to be fifty, could he?”

“No, indeed.” Mr. Wharton shook his head sadly. “Your father, I am afraid to say, is reputed to have developed the habit of bidding rather large amounts. Perhaps he was simply trying to win back enough money to save himself and thought the larger amounts might do it.”

“No, I know my father a little better than that. He liked the thrill of such things. He would bet on anything, as long as there was

something to be gained from it. I daresay that, in the end, with the thrill lessening, the only way to get that same excitement back would be to gamble larger amounts."

"Whatever the reason, my dear Miss Darrington, it would appear that he has left you in rather a sorry sort of a state."

"I simply cannot imagine, nor do I really want to hear, the figure that my father owed. Our townhouse in London, when it is sold, would certainly fetch a tremendous amount of money. If that barely pays my father's debts, then I feel truly ashamed of him."

As she spoke of their London townhouse, Georgette felt her throat tighten. For the first time since the terrible news had been delivered, she rather feared that she might cry. In her mind's eye, she was looking up at the huge house with its white stone frontage and great columns either side of an immense black door. There were four floors to the great house and windows everywhere. She could hardly believe that it would very soon no longer be her home.

And what of the staff? Her father had kept a butler and housekeeper, a valet, a cook, and two maids. Not to mention a stable-hand.

"Oh, my goodness, I am going to have to tell the staff, am I not?" Georgette's voice trembled audibly. "And really, I have no idea what I am to say to them. They will have to find work elsewhere and at such

short notice."

"Just be sure to promise them all a very good character reference. If they are good staff and are provided with a good character, then they will manage perfectly well. They will find work very easily in London in another home of good standing," the attorney said kindly. "You have other concerns, Miss Darrington. It is time to think of yourself and only yourself."

"I do not know where to begin."

"Forgive me for asking, nay *intruding*, Miss Darrington, but do you have an understanding of any sort with a young man? Is marriage a possibility at this juncture?"

"You need not ask for my forgiveness, Mr. Wharton. It is clear that you are simply trying to help me," Georgette said, blinking hard. "And no, I do not have an understanding with anybody. And I daresay that now, that would be quite impossible."

"Perhaps not impossible," Mr. Wharton said, but Georgette could tell from his tone that he was simply trying to soothe her.

For Georgette knew that it was impossible. Even if she had hoped to marry for love, still there would have been certain expectations of finance, status, and class that any future husband would expect. Of

course, had she already been well on her way to marriage, it would likely not have been an issue. However, to actually tempt a young man into matrimony when she had nothing to offer but her homeless and penniless status would be impossible. Not only that but where was she to meet such a young man now?

Despite the fact that she was the daughter of a minor baron, the *Honorable* Miss Georgette Darrington, no less, still, she had nothing. And her title was so minor that it would not matter to anybody, and she would probably do well to forget it. In truth, it was barely a title at all.

“Mr. Wharton, you know as well as I do that invitations are not going to come quite thick and fast to me anymore. After all, where would they be sent? I have no home.” Georgette felt thoroughly miserable. “I suppose this shall be the test of my friends, shall it not? Let us see, when all is known, and everybody has heard of the downturn in my fortunes, just how many of my friends and acquaintances are keen to see me.”

“You are looking into the future already, Miss Darrington. You will upset yourself even more than is necessary with thoughts of friends and acquaintances. They are, as are the staff, much further down your list.”

The ageing attorney rose from the seat behind his desk and strode

towards the door of his office. When he opened it, Georgette could hear him speaking to the housekeeper and asking for some tea to be sent in. In truth, Georgette thought that she would hardly be able to swallow the tea, even if she tried.

For a few moments, Georgette simply looked around the austere office. She wondered if she would ever see inside it again, or ever need the services of an attorney. After all, the very poorest would hardly expect such things, would they?

Feeling almost as if she had slipped into a dream, Georgette stared hazily around the room. She let her eyes fall upon the two walls which were lined with shelves. There was not a spare space on any of the shelves, each and every one of them crammed to capacity with great leather-bound legal volumes and stated cases.

The remaining walls were painted a rather dark and unappealing green colour, a sort of brownish green which, added to the fact that the windows were really rather small, made the whole room seemed cramped and somewhat airless.

“I have asked for some tea to be sent in, Miss Darrington. I realize what a dreadful shock you have had, and I cannot imagine quite how you must be feeling.”

“You are very kind, Mr. Wharton. In truth, I cannot say for sure that I

shall be able to drink the tea, but I shall try nonetheless." Georgette realized that she was being incredibly polite and wondered quite where she might need such manners in the future. Would she ever be in good society again?

"It rather feels like the only comfort I can offer you, my dear," he said and, judging by his expression of sad helplessness, he clearly meant it.

"Mr. Wharton, what on earth should I do?" Georgette said, just as the housekeeper bustled into the room carrying a laden tea-tray.

Mr. Wharton waited until his housekeeper had set their tea things and left the room before he spoke again.

"In truth, there are very few options for a young lady of breeding who has fallen on hard times. However, you do have an exemplary education and the wit and intelligence to make good use of it."

"By teaching?" Georgette said. "But surely, to open a dame school, one needs to at least have a house in which to teach the children."

"I was not talking of setting up a school, my dear. As you quite rightly point out, you shall have no accommodations for such a thing. No, I was rather thinking of your perhaps taking up a position as a governess." The moment he had finished speaking, the old attorney looked down into his teacup.

“A governess?” Georgette said, unable to hide the mixture of surprise and disappointment in her voice. “I could not possibly become a governess. Really, I could not.”

“But it would be a most suitable method of overcoming your particular struggles at the moment, Miss Darrington. You would be provided with food and board and, assuming you are able to procure the right position in the right household, you would be paid quite reasonably.”

“I had never thought that my life would come to this. I had never for one moment imagined that I would become a governess, a stranger in the home of others, no prospects nor even security. I can hardly bear it, Mr. Wharton.” And, finally, Georgette Darrington began to cry. “I am terribly sorry, do forgive me,” she said between sniffs as she drew an immaculate white lace handkerchief from the long sleeve of her gown.

“I realize that this has all come as a terrible shock, and for you to have to make a decision about your future so very quickly is truly appalling, Miss Darrington. But make a decision you must, my dear, because you have so little time. Please believe me that I would not have suggested such a position had I not thought of everything else possible. In truth, there is no respectable job for a lady of genteel upbringing who has suddenly found herself impoverished. No

respectable job, that is, except governess. I am rather afraid that so many young ladies turn to the profession because they have found themselves suddenly as you have, in dire financial straits and with no other options. I really am most terribly sorry."

"Then that is it, is it not? My future is set." She shook her head in disbelief. She looked at the clock on the wall and could hardly believe that only twenty minutes had passed since first she had heard of her terrible circumstances.

Only that morning, as she had prepared herself to visit her attorney for the reading of her father's will, Georgette had found herself wondering quite what the future would hold. She knew that she would not miss her father a great deal, even though his passing had saddened her. He had never been a particularly warm man, and since her mother passed when she was but fifteen years, he had taken very little notice of her at all.

But he had provided for her and provided well. He had ensured that she was as well-educated as her mother had always wanted her to be, and she truly wanted for nothing. Whilst she was not an ostentatious young lady, she knew that she had only to ask for a new gown and a dressmaker would be sent for. It was not a thing that she took great advantage of, but it had always been rather a comfort to know that she was well looked after.

If only she had known the truth. If only her father had told her long ago of their troubles, then at least she would have had time to plan. She would not have so easily dismissed out of hand the attentions of many a suitable young man. Had her father been honest with her, Georgette would have realized the importance of being realistic, rather than carefree and most exacting in her wants concerning a husband.

If only her father had given her that one thing. If only he had given her time, for surely that was not something he had gambled away also.

Chapter 2

“Do take a seat, Miss … Miss …?” Mr. Shelford Winstanley, proprietor of the Winstanley Employment Registry, had clearly forgotten her name the moment she had given it.

Had she described herself as the *Honorable* Miss Georgette Darrington, then perhaps he might not have forgotten it quite so readily. However, Georgette knew that when one was penniless and homeless, to describe oneself in such a way was simply ridiculous.

“Darrington. Georgette Darrington,” she said, a little impatiently.

“Yes, of course,” he said and smiled at her. He had rather a long nose, and his small, beady eyes were quite close together. All in all, Georgette rather thought that he looked like some sort of bird of prey. “And please do take a seat, Miss Darrington,” he insisted again, this time holding a chair out for her.

“Thank you, Mr. Winstanley.”

Georgette had only ever heard of employment registries because that was where her father tended to procure servants for his own household. And he had always referred to such establishments as *servant* registries because, in truth, that was exactly what they were.

Everybody of her acquaintance referred to them as *servant* registries, and she could not help thinking that Mr. Winstanley was somehow trying to give himself airs or at least give his little establishment airs, at any rate.

When she had first told her dearest friend, Henrietta Sheridan, of the dreadful circumstances in which she found herself, she had barely been able to speak the words. When she had finally come to tell Henrietta that she intended to find a good servant registry and offer her services in the hope of employment, she had simply cried. And Henrietta had cried also.

“Is it really so very bad, Georgette?” Henrietta had said, dabbing at her eyes with a crisp white handkerchief as Georgette herself did the very same.

“It is as bad as it can possibly be, Henrietta. The house in which we now sit in is soon to be sold to the highest bidder so that my father’s gambling debts might be paid off.”

“But surely there will be something left?” Henrietta had said hopefully.

“The attorney rather thinks that the proceeds from the sale will just about cover my father’s debts. There will be nothing left.”

“And must you really go to a servant registry office?” Henrietta had said, stumbling over the words.

“I have talked the whole thing out with Mr. Wharton, and he can see no other path to choose. After all, I have no family. I have no near or distant cousins, nor anybody with whom I might stay. If I do not seek work as a governess, I shall have nothing. At least as a governess I shall, if nothing else, have a roof over my head and food to eat.”

“And, in truth, you will not be treated as one of the servants.” Henrietta, good friend that she was, had hurriedly dried her eyes and done what she could to appear optimistic.

“No, I shall not be exactly treated as one of the servants, but I shall not be one of the household either. I shall be neither one thing nor the other, shall I? Is that not the very tragedy of the governess?”

“I am sure that it would be far worse to be one of the servants, Georgette. At least you will be able to study and have pride in the fact that you are teaching all which you yourself have learned. You will be an educator, my dear.”

“Oh, Henrietta, whatever am I going to do without you?” Georgette had said, smiling through her tears. “Who will pretend that all shall be well when I am alone and do not have you with me?”

“I am not pretending, my dear. And even if we are parted, I shall write to you constantly. We shall still be friends, Georgette, wherever you are.”

“And I fear you shall be my only friend, Henrietta.”

“But you have so many friends and acquaintances, my dear Georgette. You really must not think that way.”

“Oh, Henrietta. When news of my misfortune is all over London, I shall be friendless. No young lady wants me as a reminder of what a sudden change in fortunes looks like. And none of them shall know what to say to me, so would choose not to speak to me at all than to have to suffer the awkwardness of such a conversation. My friends are not all as you are, Henrietta. You are a true friend, and that is all.”

“So, Miss Darrington, what sort of work would you be looking for?” Mr Shelford Winstanley brought Georgette back to the here and now with his curiously high-pitched voice coupled with the dreadful scraping of his chair as he drew it back.

“Governess,” Georgette said a little sharply, and then thought better of it. After all, she very much needed Mr. Winstanley. Her pride was telling her that he ought to have known by her mode of dress and obvious genteel upbringing that she was not seeking a position as a housekeeper, but she knew she was simply being sensitive and that

her sensitivity would do her no good in the end. “I am looking for work as a governess, Mr. Winstanley.” She attempted a polite smile.

“Of course,” he said, smiling back and seemingly unaware of her poor humour. “And have you recently left a position?” He leaned forward and, as he tipped his head down a little, Georgette thought his nose looked even longer.

“No, Mr. Winstanley. I have not left a position, nor have I ever had one. I have not worked before, you see.”

Georgette saw a smile pass fleetingly across his lips. In her world, never to have worked was a sign of status. In the world of Shelford Winstanley, it was likely a sign of uselessness. For a moment, Georgette pondered the differences of class. Work was unheard of in one, and its lack frowned upon in another. Well, since she was very much entering a lower social status, then she would have to accept all that came with it.

“Oh, I see.” From the look on his face, Georgette knew that Mr. Winstanley was finally gathering that her circumstances had taken a sudden and dramatic downward turn.

No doubt, he had seen many a well-bred young lady who had suffered a similar fate coming through his doors.

“But I can assure you that I have a first-rate education, Sir,” Georgette said, somewhat defensively.

“I have no doubt, Miss Darrington.” Mr. Winstanley smiled reassuringly. “And everybody has to start somewhere, do they not?” She knew he was trying to make her feel better but, in truth, it was not working.

“Indeed,” she said. “So tell me, do you have anything suitable?”

“At the moment, I have filled all of the governess requirements from my clients,” he said, and Georgette felt her heart sink. Once again, she was having her time wasted, and she knew that she had none left to lose. “All but one, that is.”

“Oh, so you *do* have a suitable position?” Georgette knew that she had snapped a little but could not quite take to his way of doing things. After all, if he had a suitable position, then why not simply say so?

“I have a position, Miss Darrington, but whether it is suitable or not, I shall leave to your own discretion to discover.”

“What exactly do you mean, Mr. Winstanley?”

“I have a position on my books which has been there almost continually for the last six months. I have filled it three times, and no

less than three governesses have left the position within weeks of arrival. To be perfectly honest, this is the first time that I have been utterly frank in that regard, but I can see no reason for being any other way. You see, I rather fear that the three governesses I sent out there were quite unprepared for what they found and, as such, were rather disquieted by the whole thing and very quickly returned to me in search of other positions."

"Goodness me, whatever has gone so very wrong on three occasions? Surely there is something wrong with the place?" Georgette said, her mouth going a little dry as her common sense began to tell her that this was her only hope.

"As I understand it, the children in question are not the problem. Rather, it is the employer himself. He has rather an intimidating manner and is little interested in solving any problems which a new governess might find in her new position."

"Such as?" Georgette said, not keen to be flannelled upon the subject.

"Such as problems with other staff members. There is, I believe, a children's nurse who was particularly awkward and a certain amount of isolation for the governess to endure."

"Is that not common for a governess? Not the awkward nurse, I mean, but rather the isolation. After all, the governess is neither fish nor

fowl, is she? She is a woman of breeding with no money and therefore does not fit well with either the servants or the master."

"I see that you have a somewhat pragmatic approach to the whole thing, Miss Darrington; a quality that will, undoubtedly, serve you well if you choose to take this particular position."

"What else can you tell me about the family?"

"The master of the house is not father to the children, but rather their guardian. As I understand it, he is not a particularly willing guardian, and it was a responsibility that he never sought. There are two little girls of around four or five years; twins, no less." He paused for a moment. "As to the position itself, it is fairly standard fare for a governess. You are to teach the children the three Rs, as you might expect. On top of reading, writing, and arithmetic, you must also teach the children the typical run of accomplishments. French, piano lessons, watercolour painting, poetry. Whatever you have at your disposal as far as accomplishment training is concerned."

"Well, I have all four of those things at my disposal, Sir, and more besides. And as for the three Rs, I shall have no problem whatsoever in teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic," Georgette said, thoughtfully. "And what are my conditions to be if I choose to take the position?" As nice as it was to discover that she had all of the necessary learning of her own to be able to pass on, the practicalities

of her day-to-day life and her payment was going to be really rather more important to her, at least for the time being.

“Well, I must say that the position is particularly well paid. Eighty pounds a year is being offered.” He smiled at her, and Georgette could hardly believe that he was, indeed, smiling.

“Eighty pounds a year,” she said, her tone entirely flat. In truth, she could not believe that she would have so little.

“Miss Darrington, I realize that this is the first time that you have undertaken such a thing, but I must tell you that the going rate for a governess is something more akin to twenty pounds a year.”

“Twenty pounds a year?” she said, incredulously. “That is what my father paid the servants.”

“Well, the governess gets a little more than the servants, but ordinarily not very much. And sometimes, there is nothing to choose between the wage of a servant on the upper scale of things and a new governess.”

“Really, I had no idea.”

“But your conditions would be rather better, I feel sure. You would not necessarily be sleeping in servants’ quarters. Obviously, you would

not be integral to the main living area of the house, but you would certainly be set a little apart from the other staff." He smiled again.

It was the very idea of being set a little apart that gave Georgette the very worst feeling. Being set apart would be a very good way of ensuring that she was never accepted by the other staff. And, in truth, she was not sure she would have a great deal in common with them even if she were not set apart.

All in all, Georgette knew that the life of the governess was a life of limbo. A woman of good breeding suspended in a world where she could neither progress on her own account nor marry suitably well. She would simply be stuck there with the sort of pay that was so low she would never be able to save her old age. And, having very little time off and few connections, the idea of escaping such a life and into a suitable marriage seemed an impossibility. Add to that the fact that she would almost certainly be denied the right of simple friendship, even company, and she really wondered what, if anything, life had left to offer her.

"And what of the family, Mr. Winstanley?" Georgette said miserably.

"Ah, well the house and grounds are, I believe, truly spectacular." Mr. Winstanley seemed suddenly to be warming up. This was obviously all that this position had to recommend it, and he was going to sell it for all it was worth. "The household is immense, Miss Darrington,

employing almost fifty staff."

"Fifty staff?" Georgette said, quite surprised. For a moment, she thought sadly of the seven staff she had had to write character references for. "Then it must be a very large house."

"The largest in Oxfordshire, Miss Darrington," Mr. Winstanley said and, despite the fact that this was clearly something of a problematic vacancy for him, he seemed suddenly puffed up with pride.

"Oxfordshire, Sir?" Georgette said rather shrilly. In truth, she had not imagined that the position would be outside of London.

"Yes, Miss Darrington; Draycott Hall is in Oxfordshire."

"Draycott Hall?" Georgette said, silently trying to work out how many miles there were between London and Oxford. Not, of course, that it mattered a great deal. After all, there was nothing left in London for her to come back to.

"Yes, Draycott Hall. It is the country seat of the Duchy of Draycott."

"Duchy?" Georgette said, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Yes, I rather forgot to mention that your employer would be Hamilton Whitehall, the Duke of Draycott."

Chapter 3

The carriage ride, despite stopping for an overnight stay at a coaching inn halfway, still seemed incredibly arduous.

She was traveling post-chaise, and the horses had, by necessity, needed to be changed every fifteen miles. That had meant a change halfway through each of the two days of travel. Still, it was a mail coach and was, as were all mail coaches, rather overloaded with mail and the assorted passengers that it was never designed to take.

Having absolutely no means whatsoever at her disposal, barring a few pounds that she had taken from her bedroom when she had finally quit her home for the last time, Georgette had baulked at the idea of the cost of traveling post-chaise. However, Mr. Winstanley at the registry office had immediately informed her that the Duke of Draycott always paid the traveling expenses of the governesses.

As the carriage bumped along, Georgette could not help thinking that the Duke of Draycott must have paid out an awful lot of money for mail coaches in the last six months, particularly if the other governesses had also come from London.

Initially, there had been three other people on the inside of the coach with her when they had first set off from Piccadilly. None of the

original three remained by the second day of travelling, each leaving the coach at one of the planned stops to change the horses. However, others had embarked upon their own journeys from those stops, and Georgette felt herself somewhat exhausted from what seemed to her to be almost perpetual introductions to people she had no desire to get to know.

In truth, it was not simply because she did not wish to know anybody, but rather that she did not wish to explain where she was going and why. It was almost as if she feared the scorn. Even people of lower class seemed to look down upon a person who had fallen in fortunes. A young lady of her obvious breeding setting off on a long journey to become a governess in a great house would clearly fit the category perfectly. Without explanation, all in her company would instantly know that she had become suddenly impoverished, and she could not bear it.

At first, the idea that she would be so very far away from London had quite unsettled her. It was almost as if Georgette would, at intervals, forget that she would have no home to return to there, even if she did go back to London.

In the end, she simply tried to think of it in another way. At least if she were not working in London, there would be very little chance of happening upon an acquaintance she had known in better times. More than once, Georgette tried to imagine the horror of being the

governess in the house where one of her former acquaintances had arrived as a visitor. In truth, her sense of humiliation would have been complete in such circumstances.

At least in Oxfordshire, she knew nobody, and nobody knew her. And she need not explain to a single person about her former life and what had happened to change everything. She would simply be the governess; anonymous and isolated.

By the time the coach had come upon the immense driveway which would eventually lead to Draycott Hall, Georgette was the only remaining passenger in the post-chaise. In truth, Georgette would not have realized that they had entered the estate of Draycott had the driver not called down to her. She could see no house as yet, only vast woodlands and green fields everywhere. She had even seen a river flowing across the land and had felt the bump of the carriage as it had gone over the bridge which traversed it.

It was not until the driveway dropped down a little and they found themselves in a clearing that she saw the house for the first time. At that moment, Georgette was glad that she was alone inside the carriage, for she gasped audibly.

Georgette had never in her life attended such a place. Whilst she had been a minor member of the aristocracy, still, her father did not have the sort of connections that would have led either of them to so grand

a place.

From her vantage point, Georgette could see Draycott Hall in all its glory. It was truly the most enormous mansion she had ever set eyes on, and she now rather wondered quite how only fifty servants could service such a building.

And, much apart from the great woodlands of the estate itself, Draycott Hall was set in the most beautifully landscaped grounds she had ever seen.

Georgette almost pressed her face against the window as if it would somehow give her a better view. Set in the very center of the vast and immaculate green lawns was a great stone fountain of the most immense proportions she had ever seen. The central feature of the fountain was a great stone column with circular platforms, ranging from large at the bottom to very small at the top of the column. The water itself seemed to come from a finial at the very top of the column and slowly trickled down into the first of the circular platforms, overflowing that and flowing into the next. And on it went until all the platforms were filled and the water spilled over into the base of the great stone fountain itself. For a moment, Georgette busied her mind entirely with quite how the thing must work.

She realized, of course, that the source of the water must come from a much higher place, relying upon gravity to force the water up through

a pipe of some sort inside the stone column and out the finial at the top. Of course, she had seen the river running across the land and thought that it must surely wind around the back of the great estate to higher ground behind. Still, the work which must have gone into the creation of such a thing must have been truly involved.

Although there was much countryside surrounding London itself, Oxfordshire seemed to be really rather rich in greenery. And the estate itself, the very grounds of Draycott Hall, seemed to contain more countryside than she had ever imagined herself to have been comfortable with. In truth, Georgette had always very much been a town dweller, loving London more than any place she had ever been. Quite how she would do now in the country was beyond her.

They traveled for several more minutes before finally drawing up to the great gravel apron which seemed to surround Draycott Hall on all sides. The post-chaise drew up on the west side of the mansion without hesitation of any kind; clearly, the driver was no stranger to the estate and very likely drove the mail there on a regular basis.

“Well, you are finally here, Miss Darrington,” the driver said with a cheery smile as he opened the door for her and gave her his arm to help her out.

“Thank you kindly,” Georgette said with a frozen smile. As much as she was grateful to her driver, her nerves had rather begun to

overtake her.

“I daresay you will get used to it,” he said with a knowing nod and smiled at her so kindly that Georgette felt a little wave of emotion. “It is certainly a very fine place.”

“Thank you,” Georgette said and smiled this time with a little more warmth. “How very kind of you. And I daresay I *will* get used to it in time.”

“Right, well I will take your trunk down first, and then I will come back for their mail,” he said with a smile as he disappeared around the back of the carriage to unstrap her large wooden trunk from the back plate.

With the driver distracted, Georgette took a moment to look around her. Standing in front of so large a building she felt tiny and insignificant, her fears getting ready to overwhelm her. As beautiful as everything seemed to be, surely this would never feel like home. And, as large and as luxurious as she thought her own home had always been, it was as nothing to this very fine estate.

For an awful moment, Georgette wanted nothing more than to climb back into the carriage and tell the driver to take her far, far away. She was almost overcome with a sense of dread and the certain knowledge that she would never, ever like the place. She did not want to meet its

master, nor any of its servants. In truth, at that moment, she did not even want to meet her infant charges. Georgette simply wanted to run.

Quite without knowing she was doing it, Georgette began to walk backwards and forwards a little on the spot almost. It was as if her feet were making ready to take flight, and she felt almost unable to stop herself.

Hearing the driver groan as he shouldered the heavy trunk, Georgette knew that she would have to get a firm hold of her senses immediately. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed down her skirts, straightened her spine, and held her chin up. Above all things, she must not creep into that house with her head down as if she were ashamed of herself.

“Oh, thank God for that. Here comes one of the footmen,” the driver said, smiling at the smart young man dressed in full livery who was approaching to provide assistance. “This is surely not your job, but I shan’t turn the offer down,” he went on and laughed.

“I do not mind a bit of heavy lifting now and again,” the footman said and smiled back.

“Thank you kindly,” Georgette said, keen to let the young footman know that she was grateful for his assistance.

“Think nothing of it,” he answered in rather a flat sort of tone, certainly flatter than the one he had used for the driver. “Shall we?” he added, more to the driver than to Georgette, but she followed them nonetheless.

As she followed the two men down the side of the west wing of Draycott Hall, she very quickly realized that she would be entering the building via the tradesmen’s entrance. Quite whether she would always be expected to enter thus, she could not tell.

When Georgette saw a woman of rather stern appearance in a stiff looking and plain black gown approaching her, the importance of which door she entered through seemed to leave her. She could not help thinking she had more imminent concerns.

“Miss Darrington, you have arrived at last,” the woman said rather harshly. “I am Mrs Griffin, the housekeeper here at Draycott Hall.”

“How very nice to meet you, Mrs Griffin,” Georgette responded as brightly as she could manage, hoping her nerves were not showing through the facade of calmness.

“I shall first take you through to meet Mr Pearson, the butler, and then you shall be shown the entire below-stairs area. Not that I suppose you will be spending a great deal of time here,” she said, seeming rather keen to show her displeasure. “But, nonetheless, it is

wise for you to know where you are going if you need to come down here for anything."

"Yes, wise indeed," Georgette said, still brightly but certainly not keen to engage the woman any further. She would simply listen to what she was being told and look at what she was being shown. Too much of an attempt at conversation would very likely not be wise at that moment.

The housekeeper turned sharply on her heel and began to walk away, and Georgette, having almost to run to catch up with her, hastily followed along behind. They took several turns down numerous corridors, all of which seemed to have doors running off them. For the life of her, Georgette thought that she would struggle to find her way back to the entrance if the housekeeper left her at that moment.

As they continued to walk, the housekeeper keeping up her rather extreme pace, Georgette simply concentrated on the clipping of their heels against the immense gray flagstones of the floor. The walls of the corridor were also stone, and there seemed nothing of softness to absorb the sound of their boots on the floor. Everything seemed to echo just a little.

Finally, they turned at the end of another long corridor and, seeing a door in front of them, Georgette rather thought the butler would be found there. In truth, she felt a little angry already that she was being brought before the butler as if she were simply something to be

inspected. She wanted to shout and scream that she had lived all her life with a butler of her own and that she would not be belittled in such a way. However, Georgette knew that there was no point.

She was a governess because she had nothing, and everybody there would be very aware of the fact. All she had to recommend her were an exemplary education and good breeding, the very things that would set her apart from the rest of the staff and leave her without friends or company of any kind, she felt sure of it.

“Enter,” the butler said rather grandly when the housekeeper knocked loudly upon the door.

Mrs Griffin pushed the door open and walked in, leaving Georgette to trail along behind her. Georgette almost laughed at the whole thing; they seemed to have a little hierarchy below stairs with the butler and the housekeeper clearly seen as the Lord and the Lady in their particular little domain.

Georgette could not help thinking that it did not matter where you were, or what circumstances you were in, somebody somewhere always wanted to be at the top of things. Somebody somewhere always wanted power over others regardless of the class and social status of the group. So, perhaps people were not so very different after all.

“This is the new governess, Mr Pearson,” the housekeeper said stiffly.

“Is it indeed, Mrs Griffin?” the butler said, turning his head to coolly survey Georgette.

“My name is Miss Georgette Darrington,” Georgette said levelly, fully determined to effect a proper introduction rather than simply be introduced as *the new governess*.

“Very good,” the butler said, seemingly a little taken aback. Presumably, he thought himself to be most intimidating, and it very likely worked wonderfully on the rest of the staff. Georgette made a silent promise to herself that it would never, ever work on her. “Well, I am Mr Pearson, the butler.”

“How very nice to make your acquaintance, Mr Pearson,” Georgette said, suddenly rather keen to give a display of her firm grasp on modern manners.

“Likewise, Miss Darrington.”

Chapter 4

Georgette awoke early the following morning, just as the sun was beginning to come up. She was not due to meet the Duke of Draycott until ten o'clock, and her breakfast would not be brought up until eight. With a sigh, Georgette closed her eyes and tried with all her might to get back to sleep. She did not want to simply lay there for two hours waiting for something to happen, staring at the four walls of the Spartan little attic room.

In truth, the room was probably a good deal better than those the servants had at their disposal; it was simply that it felt nothing like home. In London, Georgette had enjoyed an extremely large bedroom with all manner of pretty drapery, wall hangings, and rugs. Her bed had been of the four-poster variety with such beautiful fabric hanging in great swathes from its framework that it was a pure joy to wake up in it every day.

As she looked around her room at Draycott Hall, Georgette knew that life would never be the same again. Her bed now was a small affair, half the width of the one she had had at home. It was a very simply designed iron frame with no posts and no beautiful drapery. Despite that, she had found the mattress extraordinarily comfortable; not a thing she had expected.

The room was really rather small indeed, and her bed was pushed tight up against the wall on one side, with a small nightstand on the other. The nightstand was old but well-made from walnut wood. It was clearly something that had once been in use within the hall itself and, having seen better years, had been demoted to servants' furniture.

There was a small wooden stand, presumably to place a wash bowl upon, and a great chest of drawers of similar quality to the walnut nightstand but constructed of a dark oak. It was in perfect condition but was rather too large for the room, and its dark colour, coupled with the fact that all of the walls were painted in a seemingly miserable shade of green which reminded her of the attorney's office, made the whole thing seem very dark and cramped.

In the far corner of the room was a small table with a solitary wooden chair beside it. This would presumably be where she took her meals. Georgette let out a sigh; it looked so very lonely.

There was a door leading to a small closet area which was just large enough for her to walk into and hang her gowns. The very moment she had been left alone in her room, Georgette had hastily unpacked her gowns and hung them for fear of creases that would never come out. Still, she had packed very carefully and was pleased to note that all of her gowns looked crisp and in good order.

The only saving grace in the tiny room was an immense window which, when the heavy drapes were pulled back, allowed the early morning sunshine in. Georgette rather thought that it was the only thing which stopped the room feeling like a dark and dingy little coffin, and she quite wondered how she would manage in the winter when every day began in darkness.

Still, she would not think of that, for the sun was shining, and she knew she must take from life whatever small pleasures it offered, even if the only pleasure was early morning sunlight.

When Georgette had finally been taken to her small attic room the day before, she had not realized that she would be left there until the following day. She had been shown around the entire servants' area by the butler, Mr Pearson, who had been taciturn one moment and pompous the next. Georgette could not help feeling that the man had continually tried to prove a point to her throughout their entire encounter.

In truth, Georgette had been rather interested and somewhat amazed by the sheer size of the working area below stairs. The butler had seen fit to show her every bit of it, coal stores included.

"Obviously, you have seen my office. And here, as you can see, is the housekeeper's room. If you need to speak to anybody below stairs, it is to Mrs Griffin that you must first attend. Only come to my office if you

cannot find Mrs Griffin." As they moved from place to place, Georgette was struck by the very determined straight-backed walk of the butler. He held his head so high that it almost tipped backwards, giving the impression that he was looking up towards the ceiling.

"Yes, of course," Georgette said, not for the first time.

Georgette had very much decided not to engage with the butler. She would not pander to his devastatingly large ego by asking him any questions. She would simply make a very good mental note of everything she discovered in case she did, indeed, ever need to go below stairs for anything. Still, quite why she would need to know where the larder and meat safe was, not to mention the coal stores and chicken sheds, was quite beyond her.

"And here you see the butler's pantry," he said with something of a flourish. "It simply contains all of the serving equipment that is required to run a fine establishment such as Draycott Hall." He held out an arm to indicate that she should go into the room and look around.

In truth, Georgette had never seen such an array of serving platters, cutlery, and crockery. There was every conceivable item required to serve any manner of meal. And yet, despite her interest, Georgette still could not see quite why the butler would be so keen for her to see it all.

“It truly is very well-stocked indeed,” Georgette said, for want of any other conversation to make.

“Yes, but then this is the largest estate for many counties across,” he said as if her comment had been quite stupid. Georgette chose not to respond.

“And this through here,” he said, striding down a somewhat wider corridor and pushing open the door into another room, “is the servants’ hall.”

Georgette, following close behind, was truly amazed at the size of the servants’ hall. There were several long tables in the room, all neatly lined up like trestle tables at a county fair. Of course, the room would need to be large to accommodate meals for the alleged fifty members of staff.

“This is where the servants take their meals and any other small breaks they are allotted,” he said, his tone rather pompous once again. “Of course, you shall not be taking your meals in here. As is proper, your meals shall be sent to your room, and you shall dine alone.”

Georgette immediately recognized that his words were intended to hurt. He had taken something which might well have been expected to be a compliment of sorts, the fact that she would not be dining with

the servants, and he had twisted it to place full emphasis upon the fact that Georgette would have no friends amongst the staff.

His keenness to inform her of the fact in their first meeting gave her the dullest, emptiest feeling in her stomach. It felt almost like the dull and gentle pain of missing a meal and finding oneself really rather hungry. And yet, at that moment, she knew she could not have eaten a thing. What a spiteful man he was.

“And the children?” Georgette said and immediately wished she had not.

She knew that she had given the butler the upper hand by letting him know that she did not relish the idea of isolation.

“They shall eat with the nurse, obviously. They do not take meals with His Grace.” Again, he spoke to her in a manner which suggested he thought her entirely stupid.

“Indeed,” Georgette said flatly and turned to walk out of the servants’ hall.

“Down here,” the butler said, hurrying to overtake her, clearly wrong-footed by the fact that he had been forced to follow her and not the other way around. “At the very end of this particular corridor, you will find the servants’ quarters. Most of the servants sleep down here

with just a few in attic rooms. Of course, the ones who do sleep in attic rooms are on the east side of the building, whereas you yourself shall be on the west."

"Of course," Georgette said, choosing not to rise to his provocation any more.

So, she would be eating alone, sitting alone night after night in an attic room set far apart from any others and devoid of any human contact save for that of her small charges and possibly the nurse. Well, it was simply something that she would have to get used to and, if she could not, then the butler would be the very last person to hear about it.

"So, now that you know where everything is, I shall return to my own duties and leave you to make your way to the housekeeper's room for further instruction," he said and, with a curt nod, turned to stride away from her.

For a moment, Georgette's heart began to thud. She had wanted to tell the pompous Mr Pearson that she had absolutely no idea how to find her way back to the housekeeper's room. Her tour of below stairs had been speedy and very far from methodical, an approach which she felt to have been entirely purposeful.

Clearly, the butler had wanted to make a fool of her. He had wanted

her to run after him and admit that she could not quite remember where the housekeeper's room was. Well, he would have a long wait if he thought that *that* was going to happen. Taking a deep breath and, not the first time that day, straightening her spine, Georgette strode back along the corridor in the hope that she would very soon recognize the door to the housekeeper's room. Of course, to her, all of the doors looked the same.

After just a few minutes, Georgette's resolve had dissipated entirely. She seemed to continually pass maids and smartly dressed male servants, all of whom kept their eyes focused firmly on the gray flagstones as they passed her. Not one of them would look in her direction, not even to nod a silent greeting.

Finally, she saw the smartly liveried uniform of the footman who had helped to carry in her large wooden trunk. Feeling a little relieved, she smiled and approached him.

"Would you be so kind as to show me where the housekeeper's room is?" Georgette said as he regarded her coolly.

"It is that way," he said with the vaguest nod of his head before turning and walking away.

None the wiser, Georgette let out a great sigh. What a hateful household this was. Did not one of them below stairs have the

presence of mind to act on their own accord and not simply be spiteful upon demand?

Well, if that were as much as she could expect from her fellow employees, Georgette would be pleased to eat alone and have nothing to do with them. Feeling antagonized made her feel suddenly purposeful also, and she began to stride through the corridors, pushing doors open and looking inside without a moment's apology to whomever she found within.

Finally, using just such an approach, she located the housekeeper's room.

"Mrs Griffin, Mr Pearson has sent me back to you," Georgette said with a level voice.

"Yes, I am to take you now to your room," Mrs Griffin said, rising to her feet and moving around the desk she had been sitting at as if she had been seemingly looking at receipts.

"Thank you," Georgette said, keen to keep any hint of attempted friendliness out of her voice.

The servants' staircase was located quite centrally, and one was able to go from the basement to the attics without happening upon a member of the household. It was with some relief that Georgette

realized that the route from the top of the servants' staircase to her own little room in the attic was a very simple one, and it went some way to giving her a sense of having her bearings if only just a little.

"This is your room," Mrs Griffin said, pushing the door open and allowing Georgette to enter first.

"How lovely," Georgette said, again giving nothing away in her tone.

"Well, at least you do not have to share as many of the servants do." The tone of Mrs Griffin's voice led Georgette to very much realize that the servants' rooms, and possibly Mrs Griffin's room itself, were very much inferior to the one that she would inhabit.

"Quite so."

"I think you have everything you need here," Mrs Griffin said, clearly a little upended by Georgette's very short and succinct response. "And through that door, there is a small hanging closet for your gowns," she said, and then looked significantly at the large wooden trunk.

No doubt she thought that the new governess had far too many personal possessions. Still, that was something that Mrs Griffin would have to come to terms with without any input from Georgette. Not one hour into her new employment, and already Georgette was entirely tired of everybody she had so far met at Draycott Hall.

“It would be as well if you simply stayed in your room for the rest of the day, Miss Darrington.”

“Why?” Georgette asked coolly.

“Because you are not due to meet His Grace until ten o’clock tomorrow. Dinner will soon be served and, since you are taking yours in your room, then you might just as well be here to receive it.”

“Indeed.”

“Once your dinner things are taken, there really is nothing left for you to do today.”

“And who is to take me to His Grace tomorrow?”

“I shall be taking you.”

“And shall you be collecting me from here or should I make my way downstairs?”

“There shall be no need for you to leave your room until I collect you. A jug of warm water and a bowl will be left on the small table outside your room at seven o’clock. At eight o’clock, your breakfast will be left on that table and the jug collected. And a few minutes before ten

o'clock, I shall come to collect you."

"Thank you," Georgette said, feeling a little trapped by the idea that she would be keeping to her room the rest of the afternoon, through the night, and into the next morning.

"I am sure that Mr Pearson has told you that there are no other members of staff sleeping in this part of the attic. They are quite on the other side of the house. However, His Grace inhabits rooms below this part of the attic, and so you would be advised to tread very carefully. He is not keen to hear noise and would certainly be most disappointed to hear anything at all coming from your room. Please take care not to make too much noise."

"Yes, of course," Georgette said, looking at the woman incredulously. Quite what noise she thought Georgette might make in the middle of the night was beyond her.

"Well, I shall leave you. Dinner will be served in about two hours." And with that, Mrs Griffin turned on her heel and strode away, leaving Georgette entirely alone.

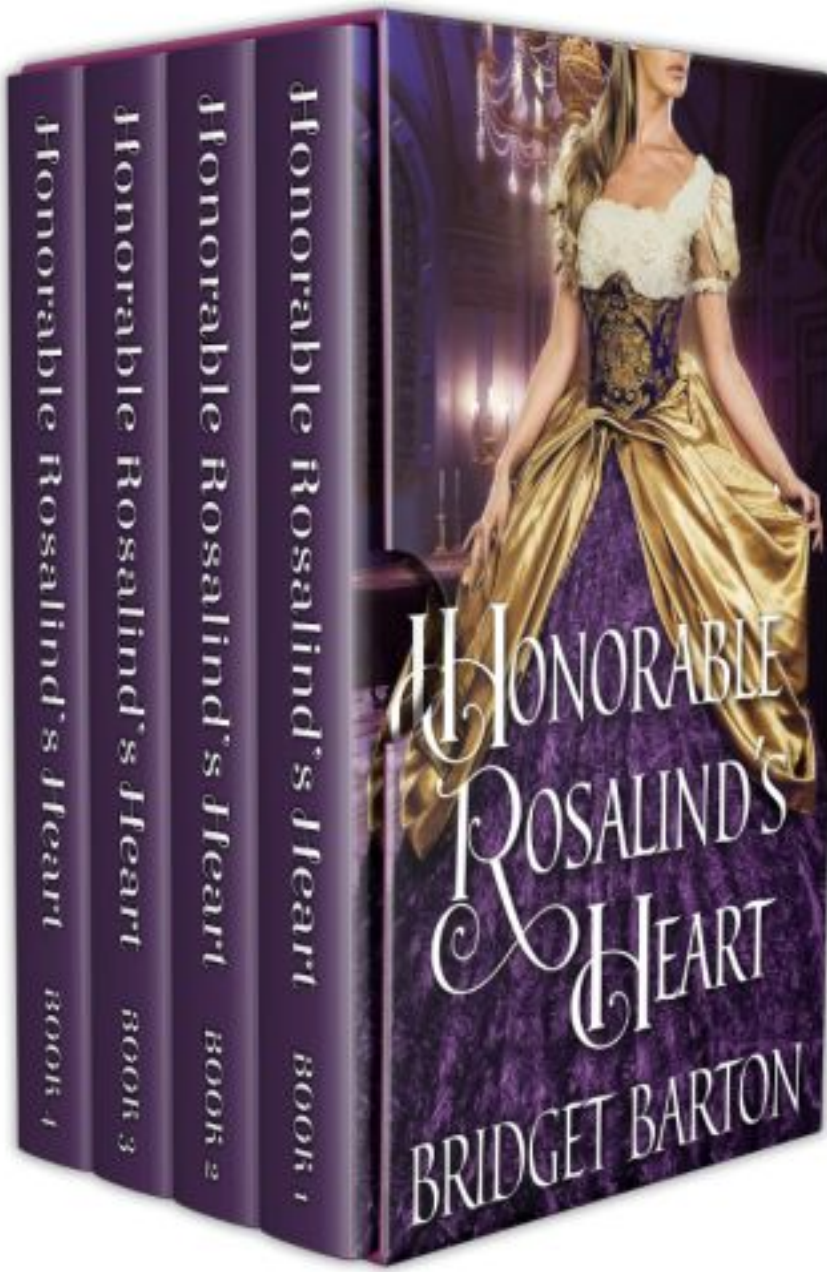
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